



Artificial Intelligence and Authority. Unpacking China's Tech Policy through Sage-King Governance

Original Paper

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Abstract

As China rises to become a high-tech society and actively adopts strategic policies to embrace the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era, this paper argues that China's bold practices in AI conform to the historical logic of state-led technological development. China's science and technology (S&T) policy framework has undergone three strategic paradigm shifts: military-industrial consolidation (1949–1978), market-oriented modernization (1978–2012), and comprehensive securitization (2012–present), with AI emerging as a pivotal frontier reflecting the transition from developmental statism to techno-security statecraft. This study employs the Sage-King Governance Paradigm and progressive Reductionist Framework to analyze China's S&T policy evolution, demonstrating: (1) how China's civilizational worldview and Sage-King tradition shape public perceptions of technological progress and legitimize strong state leadership; (2) this political-psychological culture underpins both the legitimacy and velocity of China's AI-driven modernization; and (3) technology mediates the transition from present (A) to ideal future (A'), with the Great Union (*datong*) functioning as both founding myth and governance ideal. Ultimately, China's AI trajectory is driven less by global dominance than inward-looking self-actualization. This paper advances international studies on technology politics by revealing how political-psychological logics and civilizational imaginaries—rather than material power-drive divergent national AI trajectories and shape endogenous visions of technology and statecraft.

Keywords

technology-politics relations • China's AI politics • Sage-king governance • political psychology

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1 Introduction

In the 21st century, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a transformative force globally, reshaping economies, security, and governance—with China among the most prominent states embedding it at the core of national strategy. Despite abundant realist and techno-security analyses of China's AI rise, little attention has been paid to the domestic political-psychological forces driving its momentum. While AI poses common challenges and opportunities, national responses diverge—not merely due to external conditions or global standing but deeply rooted in internal political culture and cognitive frameworks. However, dominant international relations paradigms often reduce states to unitary actors, overlooking how domestic perceptions and value systems shape strategic choices. This paper reframes “national technological path preference” as an endogenous question of political cognition.

China's science and technology (S&T) policy has shifted through three paradigms—military-industrial consolidation (1949–1978), market-driven modernization (1978–2012), and comprehensive securitization (2012–present)—with AI marking a critical turn from developmental statism to techno-security statecraft. Using the Sage-King Governance Paradigm and a progressive reductionist lens, this study argues: (1) how China's civilizational worldview and Sage-King tradition shape public perceptions of technological progress and legitimize strong state leadership; (2) this political-psychological culture underpins both the legitimacy and velocity of China's AI-driven modernization; and (3) technology mediates the transition from present (A) to ideal future (A'), with the Great Union (*datong*) functioning as both founding myth and governance ideal. Ultimately, China's AI trajectory is driven less by global dominance than inward-looking self-actualization.

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The paper proceeds as follows. Section one reviews the literature on technology-politics and AI in China; section two outlines the evolution of China's S&T policies; section three introduces the Sage-King Governance Paradigm and Progressive Reductionist Framework; section four analyzes Sage-King applications in AI policy; section five compares China-U.S. AI innovation to reveal China's endogenous drivers. This study advances international studies on technology politics by showing how political-psychological logics and civilizational imaginaries-rather than material power-drive divergent national AI trajectories and shape endogenous visions of technology and statecraft.

2 Literature Review

The current research on techno-political relations is primarily categorised into two theoretical frameworks: technological determinism and techno-political power theory.

2.1 Technological Determinism

Technological determinism posits that technological development drives social, economic, and political transformations and is the main force behind societal progress. According to this view, technological progress is seen as an independent force-historical development is inevitably driven by technological innovations, which shape social structures and cultural values¹. Winner has explored the profound impact of technology on social structure, arguing that although technology is a product of politics, it can selectively determine the evolution of certain social institutions or structures, for instance, nuclear energy technology, due to its danger, inevitably requires a highly centralized, hierarchical control system in terms of management.² Hughes introduced the concept of "technological momentum," contending that once a technological system reaches a certain scale, it exerts a strong reverse influence on social structures and political decision-making, thereby becoming a major driving force for social change.³ Ellul argued that the relentless advance of technology increasingly controls society and that technological progress, which cannot be effectively restrained, ultimately determines the political structure of society.⁴ Postmodern technology theorists maintain that in a postmodern society, technology creates a virtual reality that alters people's perceptions of "reality" while simultaneously transforming political power, social structure, and cultural identity.⁵

2.2 Technological Power Theory

In contrast to technological determinism, the technological power theory contends that technological development and application are products of social power structures and tools of power struggles and control. Technology does not automatically determine societal development; rather, its evolution is shaped by social forces and political decisions. Technological power theory emphasizes that technology is not merely a tool for influencing politics but possesses an independent power structure capable of reshaping political and economic orders on a global scale. Robert Gilpin points out that technological revolutions have been a key factor in rapid economic growth in core regions and the rise of peripheral societies.⁶ Paul Kennedy observed that differences in the growth rates of national power and changes in technological breakthroughs and organizational forms mean that the relative status of great powers in global affairs is in constant flux.⁷ Historically, both Britain and the United States adopted protective tariffs during their industrial rise to create stable markets for new technological products, regulated technology diffusion according to the development cycles of technological innovation, and thereby secured international competitive advantages for their own countries.⁸

More radical is the theory of technological imperialism, which holds that the spread of technology is often closely connected with imperialism and global inequality. International governance frequently reflects the interests of powerful actors while neglecting broader societal concerns and excluding diverse voices from the global South.⁹ In the digital and AI era, long-standing global developmental imbalances have become even more pronounced, with many underdeveloped nations lacking the capacity to keep pace, thereby risking becoming "digital colonies" under the shadow of Western powers. In addition to traditional state

1 Heilbroner, Robert L. "Do machines make history?." *Technology and culture*, 8.3 (1967): 335-345.

2 Winner, Langdon. *The whale and the reactor: A search for limits in an age of high technology*. (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 19-39.

3 Hughes, Thomas Parke. *Networks of power: electrification in Western society, 1880-1930*. (JHU press, 1993), 79-82.

4 Ellul, Jacques. *The technological society*. (Vintage, 2021), 3-21.

5 Baudrillard, Jean. *The precession of simulacra*. (New York, 1983), 1-80.

6 Gilpin, Robert G. *The political economy of international relations*. (Princeton University Press, 2016), 8-64.

7 Kennedy, Paul. *The rise and fall of the great powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000*, (Vintage, 2010), 514-535.

8 Ha-Joon Chang, "Kicking away the Ladder: Infant Industry Promotion in Historical Perspective," *Oxford Development Studies*, 31.1 (2003):24-27.

9 Veale, M., Matus, K., & Gorwa, R., "AI and global governance: modalities, rationales, tensions." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 19.1 (2023): 255-275.

actors, tech companies have seized power by owning technology. Through algorithms, data, and global networks of users, tech companies are gradually forming new political power structures that transcend national borders, significantly weakening traditional state power and creating “digital imperialism” on a global scale.¹⁰ Although nascent international regimes for AI governance are emerging, the central role of AI in interstate competition, the dysfunction of international institutions, and diverging policy priorities have rendered substantive cooperation difficult.¹¹

2.3 AI Politics in Major International Relations Theoretical Paradigms

Realist theories assert that power politics and security imperatives dominate state behavior. Realists see AI as a new strategic asset that triggers fierce competition among countries.¹² From a realist perspective, the development and application of AI will further exacerbate power imbalances among states. AI may intensify great power competition, lead to technological arms races and security dilemmas, alter the balance of power between states, reshape national competitiveness and global status, and even trigger new cycles of great power rise and decline.¹³ Given that major powers typically control AI technology, realists are also concerned that its use may incite an excessive pursuit of power, thereby awakening an inherently aggressive posture in great powers.¹⁴

In contrast to realism, liberalism focuses on cooperation, institutions, and the potential for technology to foster global benefits. Bode highlights that AI governance is emerging as a critical theme, with international efforts striving to establish norms and regulations that promote ethical AI use.¹⁵ However, it also poses risks, such as deepening digital divides and creating new forms of inequality, and these challenges necessitate robust international frameworks to ensure AI contributes positively to global governance.¹⁶ Sparrow discusses the moral crisis that “killer robots” can raise, emphasizing that in the absence of direct human control, systems making lethal decisions not only violate ethical principles but may also violate the norms of international law.¹⁷ However, this process is challenged by the concentration of technological control in highly centralized political systems. As digital technologies foster what has been described as “surveillance capitalism,” governments with strong centralized authority may increasingly leverage these tools for domestic monitoring and social management.¹⁸ Constructivists maintain that the impact of AI is determined not only by the technology itself but also by how societies construct identities and norms regarding AI. They argue that the development and application of AI are not merely technical issues but also social and cultural phenomena that influence the transformation of ideas and values in international relations.¹⁹ Some studies have shown that AI can precisely identify and target extremist groups, raising concerns that its use may exacerbate online hate speech and ethnic violence—especially during elections, where social media platforms may serve as breeding grounds for extremist activities.²⁰

2.4 China's AI Politics

The existing research on AI politics in China predominantly adopts a realist, power-centric theoretical perspective. Repeated breakthroughs in AI by the United States have fueled concerns in China about lagging behind.²¹ Allen, Goujon and Ben also point out that, the US protectionist policies has further fueled China's efforts to develop indigenous capacity and follow more nationalistic approach.²² Jinghan Zeng argues that China's bold AI practices are part of its broad and incoherent adaptation

10 Kallhoff, A., & Scharff, C. “The Politics of Platforms: Ethical Issues of Platform Capitalism.” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 27.3 (2020): 243-260.

11 Roberts, Huw, et al. “Global AI governance: barriers and pathways forward.” *International Affairs*, 100.3 (2024): 1275-1286.

12 Ding, Jeffrey, and Allan Dafoe. “The Logic of Strategic Assets: From Oil to Artificial Intelligence.” (No. 2001.03246.) 2021. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/arx/papers/2001.03246.html>.

13 Crawford, Kate. *The atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*. (Yale University Press, 2021), 53-87.; Kello, Lucas. *The virtual weapon and international order*. (Yale University Press, 2017), 1-40.

14 Bughin, Jacques, et al. “Notes from the AI frontier: Modeling the impact of AI on the world economy.” *McKinsey Global Institute*, 4.1 (2018): 2-61.; West, Darrell M., and John R. Allen. “How artificial intelligence is transforming the world.” Brookings Institution. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-artificial-intelligence-is-transforming-the-world/> (дата обращения: 07.04. 2021). Научное издание (2018).

15 Bode, Ingviid. “AI Technologies and International Relations: Do We Need New Analytical Frameworks?.” *The RUSI Journal*, 169.5 (2024): 66-74.

16 De Angelis, Emma. “Theories of International Relations and Understanding the Geopolitics of AI: An Introduction”. *The RUSI Journal*, 169.5 (2024): 50-51.

17 Sparrow, Robert. “Killer robots.” *Journal of applied philosophy*, 24.1 (2007): 62-77.

18 Wendt, A. “The Social Construction of Technology in Global Politics: AI and the Evolution of International Norms.” *International Studies Quarterly*, 67.2, (2023): 355–370.

19 Tan, Dongchen. “Public Diplomacy in the Era of Artificial Intelligence.” *Journalism and Communications*, 7 (2019): 19-27.

20 Gagliardone, I., & Souter, D. “The Role of AI in Amplifying Hate Speech and Ethnic Violence.” *Journal of Global Affairs*. 11.2 (2020): 213–230; Klein, A., & Shi, X. “AI, Polarization, and the Rise of Ethnic Conflict in the Digital Age.” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 34.1, (2021): 55–72.

21 Zeng, Jinghan. “The US factor in Chinese perceptions of militarized artificial intelligence.” *International Affairs* (2025):323, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae323>.

22 Allen, Gregory C. “Choking off China's Access to the Future of AI.” Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 11, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/choking-chinas-access-future-ai>; Reva Goujon and Ben Reynolds, “Slaying Self-Reliance: US Chip Controls

strategy to governance by digital means.²³ China's central government is securitizing AI to mobilize local governments, market participants, intellectuals, and the general public. Other scholars note that contrary to the traditional image of a highly centralized and unified system, fragmentation has been a key pattern of the Chinese regime for decades,²⁴ and seen as one of the important reasons for China's AI success. China is also using industrial policies such as Made in China 2025 to enhance its competitiveness and become an international norm setter by exporting technology standards through the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁵ In addition to the tensions caused by great power competition, some studies argue that China's historical anxieties about its technology and regime security must fuel this trend, contributing to the rise of security discourse in China's AI politics.²⁶ Jinghan emphasized that while it helps convince domestic actors, this securitization trend could undermine Chinese key AI objectives by heading in an inward-looking, techno-nationalistic direction that may be seriously detrimental to China's AI industry and leadership ambitions.²⁷

The existing literature collectively indicates that China has incorporated AI development into its national security framework and treats it as a state strategy. China's distinctive and assertive approach to AI development has further challenged the longstanding Western assumption of the superiority of liberal democracy. However, these studies primarily focus on state-level strategies and international competitive pressures, largely analyzing China's AI development from an external perspective. They often neglect the endogenous factors—the internal political and cultural forces—that drive China's technological path preferences. The actions taken by different countries vary widely, not only as a function of external environments and international status but also because of the profound influence of domestic political culture and psychology. This paper addresses the issue of inherent inertia in a state's technology path preference from an endogenous perspective.

3 The Paradigm Evolution of China's S&T Policy

China's S&T policy evolution exhibits a coherent internal logic. To fully comprehend the development of AI, it is imperative to first review the historical trajectory of China's S&T policies, thereby establishing an analytical framework for subsequent discussions. This section summarizes China's S&T innovation policies since 1949 into three distinct paradigms: military-industrial consolidation (1949–1978), market-oriented modernization (1978–2012), and comprehensive securitization (2012–present).

Through the systematic review of their historical trajectory below, several notable characteristics emerge: first, the national leadership has played a pivotal role in the formulation of these policies; second, the development of S&T policies is intended to serve both the long-term and immediate developmental needs of the state; and finally, the influence of market actors on policy-making is relatively limited, as technological advancement in China is often subject to a highly politicized agenda.

3.1 Military-Industrial Consolidation (1949–1978)

During the Mao Zedong era, China's S&T policy was characterized by a socialist state approach to technological governance. Science and technological innovation were incorporated into the narrative of class struggle, and policies were designed to closely couple technological development with the political agenda of socialist transformation. This approach was an ideological construction of technological progress—extraordinarily mobilizing state power to establish a “central planning–military-industrial priority” model.

During this period, China emphasized learning from the Soviet model, adopting a “one-sided” foreign policy, and comprehensively studying Soviet industrialization. Mao believed, “We must do this ... in order to produce large quantities of industrial and agricultural products to meet the ever-growing needs of the people, improve living standards, reliably strengthen national defense, resist imperialist aggression, and ultimately consolidate the people's regime and prevent counter-revolutionary restoration.”²⁸ However, following the Sino-Soviet split and amid technological hegemonic competition between the United States and the Soviet

in Biden's Final Stretch”, Rhodium Group, December 9, 2024, <https://rhg.com/research/slaying-self-reliance-us-chip-controls-in-bidens-final-stretch/>.

23 Zeng, Jinghan. “Artificial intelligence and China's authoritarian governance.” *International Affairs* 96.6 (2020): 1441-1459, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa172>.

24 Lieberthal, Kenneth G., and David M. Lampton, eds. *Bureaucracy, politics, and decision making in post-Mao China*, (Univ of California Press, 2024), 1-28.; Jones, Lee, and Jinghan Zeng. “Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': beyond 'grand strategy' to a state transformation analysis.” in *Rising powers and state transformation*. (Routledge, 2020), 19-43.

25 Roberts, Huw, et al. “Global AI governance: barriers and pathways forward.” *International Affairs* 100.3 (2024): 1275-1286, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae073>.

26 Zeng, Jinghan. “Securitization of artificial intelligence in China.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14.3 (2021): 417-445, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab005>.

27 Id.

28 Mao Zedong, *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume 6, (People's Publishing House, 1999), 316.

Union, Mao's Third Worldism faced mounting challenges. The launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957 underscored the geopolitical importance of technological capability and intensified the urgency for China to develop defense technology. During this period, Mao's vision of transforming an agrarian economy into a modern industrial power became even more pronounced. The first long-term plan for S&T—Outline of the Long-term Plan for Scientific and Technological Development (1956–1967年科学技术发展远景规划纲要)²⁹—explicitly stated that scientific development must focus on areas of urgent national need rather than be spread thinly across the board. The plan identified 57 major technological tasks covering 12 key sectors, predominantly advanced defense technologies and basic industrial technologies. Investment in S&T was crucial for achieving economic modernization, facilitating industrialization, and enhancing productivity across sectors. Moreover, improving scientific capability was essential for strengthening national defense, as evidenced by the plan's focus on nuclear energy and aerospace technology. Ideologically, the plan adhered to Mao's principles of self-reliance (独立自主、自力更生), aiming to reduce China's dependence on foreign technology and expertise.

Overall, Mao's long-term plan marked a critical step in positioning China as a significant global player in S&T while advancing domestic socio-economic goals aligned with his ideological framework. During this period, China pioneered the state-led, mobilized approach to tackling major technological challenges (the “whole-nation system”), laid the groundwork for an industrial system, and achieved significant breakthroughs in defense and heavy industry—such as the atomic bomb, hydrogen bomb, missiles, and nuclear submarines—thereby establishing its status as a great power. However, the process was also characterized by a tendency toward short-term expediency. The frequent use of words such as “must” and “rapid” in the plan reflects the blunt political interference that technological development often encountered. Although CPC leaders stressed the need to combine “red” with “expertise,” in practice, the “red” was given greater priority than “expertise.” Particularly after the outbreak of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, research institutions were paralyzed, and many scientists were persecuted, severely hindering the implementation of established national technological strategies and isolating China from international scientific progress. Nevertheless, military research units involved in nuclear weapons and missile development continued to operate, and scientists in these fields were specifically protected by CPC leadership.

3.2 Market-oriented Modernization (1979–2012)

During the Reform and Opening-Up period, China's S&T policy underwent a paradigm shift characterized by a market-oriented reform. This shift involved a form of creative destruction—a break from the closed military-industrial complex model—and the establishment of a system that allowed localized reorganization of technology, capital, and institutional arrangements to provide initial momentum and experimental space for the evolution of the national innovation system. Deng described reform and opening up as a “large-scale experiment” requiring thorough “experimentation in practice” instead of textbook knowledge.³⁰ Due to his careful analysis of national and geopolitical factors, Deng emphasized that technological innovation was the driving force behind development. At the national level, Deng recognized the necessity of harnessing technological innovation to spur economic growth and modernization; on the geopolitical front, he expressed concerns that the more one traveled abroad, the more one realized how backward China was³¹, which further fueled his desire to elevate China's international standing and competitiveness.

In March 1978, at the National Science Conference (全国科学大会), Deng stated, “Intellectuals constitute a segment of the working class and represent one of its most crucial components (知识分子是第一).” Science is the primary productive force (科学技术是第一生产力) challenging the cultural revolution-era stigma attached to intellectuals, which marked a shift in CPC's focus from class struggle to economic development. Deng further stressed the need to integrate the cultivation and education of technological innovation talent with the country's overall scientific and technological level. The conference adopted China's third long-term plan for S&T development—the draft National Science and Technology Development Plan (1978–1985年全国科学技术发展规划纲要(草案))³². In contrast to the previous era, the plan focused on establishing a technological innovation system, recruiting foreign experts, introducing advanced technology from abroad, and enhancing domestic and international scientific exchanges, while significantly downplaying the emphasis on “red” political qualifications.

At the 1985 National Science and Technology Conference (全国科技工作会议), Deng happily noted the transformative reversal in the status of science and scientists as the practical development of S&T had gained nationwide consensus.³³ Subsequently,

29 The State Council of The People's Republic of China, “Outline of the Long-term Plan for Scientific and Technological Development,” Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China, https://www.most.gov.cn/ztlz/gjzcgqy/zcgqylshg/200508/t20050831_24440.html

30 Heilmann, Sebastian. *Red swan: how unorthodox policy-making facilitated China's rise*. (The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2018), 1-28.

31 Vogel, E. F. *Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China*. (Harvard University Press, 2011), 220.

32 The State Council of The People's Republic of China, “The draft National Science and Technology Development Plan(1978-1985),” Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China, https://most.gov.cn/ztlz/gjzcgqy/zcgqylshg/200508/t20050831_24438.html.

33 Chinese Academy of Sciences, “Reform of the Science and Technology System Is Designed to Liberate the Productive Forces,” *Science and Technology Daily*, January 9, 2006, https://www.cas.cn/zl/jzt/kxhyzt/qgkjdhzxbd/lslz/200601/t20060109_2664493.shtml.

the *Decision of the CPC Central Committee on the Reform of the Science and Technology System* (中共中央关于科学技术体制改革的决定) was issued, emphasizing that economic construction must rely on S&T and scientific work must be oriented toward economic development.³⁴ This reform established a new paradigm for China's S&T policy—shifting from a defense-oriented approach to a market-oriented one. The reforms spanned various aspects, including fostering industry–academia–research collaboration, promoting enterprise-led technological development and conversion of research outcomes, facilitating the free flow of talent, and creating an optimal environment for talent. In May 1995, the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Accelerating Scientific and Technological Progress* (中共中央国务院关于加速科学技术进步的决定) formally proposed the implementation of “revitalizing the country through science and education strategy (科教兴国战略)” — a first in which talent strategy was established as a national strategy integrated into the overall planning of economic and social development. In subsequent years, various policy documents were issued to promote talent development, culminating in the inclusion of the “talent power (人才强国)” strategy in the CPC Constitution and the report of the 17th National Congress. In 2006, the State Council formulated the “*National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006–2020)* (国家中长期科学和技术发展规划纲要 (2006–2020年)),” which clearly defined the development principle of “independent innovation, key breakthroughs, support for development, and leading the future”³⁵ for the S&T sector, setting the vital target of “entering the ranks of innovative countries” by 2020. In the same year, the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council issued the *Decision on Implementing the Science and Technology Development Program to Enhance Independent Innovation Capability* (关于实施科技规划纲要增强自主创新能力的决定), which explicitly set forth the objective of strengthening independent innovation and striving to build an innovation-driven country. During this period, innovation policies at all levels—from the central government to local administrations—experienced rapid growth, with the development of medium- and long-term plans and accompanying departmental regulations becoming increasingly refined.

CPC's attitude toward talent has also changed significantly. In December 1978, following the third plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (十一届三中全会), the Central Committee established the national policy of “respecting knowledge and valuing talent.” To promote economic construction and reform and opening up, and to build a talent pool, the system for college entrance examinations, professional titles, and the academicians' system was successively restored; systems such as postdoctoral training, special government allowances for experts, recognition of outstanding contributions by young and middle-aged experts, and the selection system for the “Hundred-Thousand-Talent Project (百千万人才工程)” were established.

This phase marked a revitalization of technological innovation: S&T rose to the position of “primary productive force,” and policy focus shifted to accelerating the construction of a national innovation system with a pragmatic and highly flexible character. Under the impetus of strategies such as “revitalizing the country through science and education,” “building a talent power,” the “985 Project,” and programs like the “863 Plan” and “973 Plan,” the coordination of S&T policies improved, and China's technological innovation demonstrated vigorous growth in scale and quality.

3.3 Comprehensive Securitization (2012–present)

The emergence of the concept of holistic national security (总体国家安全观) in 2014 marks a structural shift in China's technology governance logic to comprehensive securitization. Vertically, technological securitization expanded beyond traditional defense boundaries to include areas such as smart electric vehicles, gene-editing technology, and the dual-use strategic fields of AI. Horizontally, in response to rising labor costs, intensifying competition from other emerging economies, and the prospect of severe conflicts with the United States, China recognized the critical importance of enhancing competitiveness for national security. In other words, the potential social, economic, or political impact of any technological change (in particular, the security attributes of civil technology are increasingly prominent) may be incorporated into the security risk assessment. Comprehensive security emphasizes breaking the traditional concept of “external threats” and using the discourse of “non-traditional security,” such as epidemics, biosecurity, cyberspace, and data sovereignty, to understand and respond to the multiple risks faced by a country. The structure of China's S&T policy during this period is presented as follows: from simply pursuing technological development to coordinating technological progress and national security in top-level design, ensuring that emerging technologies are both development engines and strategic places for maintaining national survival and competitiveness.

The 18th National Congress of the CPC stated, “Technological innovation is the strategic support for enhancing social productivity and comprehensive national power and must be placed at the core of national development.” It also put forward the “innovation-driven development strategy (创新驱动发展战略),” shifting China's technological development from reliance on technology

34 Wikisource, “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Science and Technology System,” <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B1%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E5%85%B3%E4%BA%8E%E7%A7%91%E5%AD%A6%E6%8A%80%E6%9C%AF%E4%BD%93%E5%88%B6%E6%94%B9%E9%9D%A9%E7%9A%84%E5%86%B3%E5%AE%9A>.

35 The State Council of the People's Republic of China, “National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006–2020),” https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_240244.htm.

importation to one based on technological self-reliance and independence. On July 17, 2013, Xi Jinping set forth the “Four-Advance (四个率先)” goals at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, calling for a proactive race to seize the commanding heights of technological competition and future development.³⁶ In 2015, the “Opinions on Deepening Institutional Reform and Accelerating the Implementation of the Innovation-Driven Development Strategy (关于深化体制机制改革加快实施创新驱动发展战略的若干意见)” emphasized the need to insist on “comprehensive innovation (全面创新)” and to create a policy environment that fosters innovation, thereby laying a solid institutional foundation for China’s entry into the ranks of innovative countries. Notably, in the same year, China issued its first law that systematically defined the concept of national security in the technological field—the National Security Law (国安法), wherein article 24 states: “Strengthen independent innovation, accelerate the development of independently controllable strategic emerging industries and key core technologies in important fields, prevent and defuse risks in the science and technology sector, and safeguard national science and technology security.”³⁷ In 2016, *the National Innovation-Driven Development Strategy Outline (国家创新驱动发展战略纲要)* established a three-step strategic goal to build a world-class S&T power by 2050 while realizing socialist modernization. At the 19th National Congress, Xi reiterated that “innovation is the primary driving force for development and the strategic support for building a modern economic system... strengthening the position and role of innovation as the primary driving force and emphasizing the role of technological innovation in leading overall innovation is of profound significance.”³⁸

Amid the surge of the fourth technological revolution—exemplified by AI, new energy, and new materials—technological paradigm shifts have provided emerging economies with opportunities to catch up. However, global power transitions have also intensified competition among great powers in high-tech fields. In response, the United States has adjusted its international technology competition strategy based on hegemonic imperatives, imposing stringent conditions on talent exchanges in the technology sector and adopting “de-risking” policies in the technological industry to construct a hierarchical division of labor centered on the United States. These measures have prompted CPC leaders to resolve to further pursue technological self-reliance. In the face of dramatic changes in the external environment, China has inevitably had to partially revive the “struggle” spirit reminiscent of the Mao era. In 2021, Xi Jinping stated, “Technological innovation has become the main battleground of international strategic competition, and the competition over technological high ground is unprecedentedly fierce.”³⁹ *The Guidelines for Studying the Overall National Security Concept (总体国家安全观学习纲要)*, published in 2022, describe how the CPC has incorporated technological security into China’s broader national security framework, emphasizing that “technology is the foundation of national strength, and innovation is the soul of national progress.”⁴⁰ To this end, based on this report, China must not only become a powerful, innovation-driven technology nation but also effectively deter and counter strategic opponents, particularly those currently ahead in technology.⁴¹

In January 2024, during the 11th collective study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Xi emphasized that “technological innovation can spawn new industries, new models, and new drivers—it is the core element of developing *new productive forces (新质生产力)*.”⁴² As the epitome of this new quality, AI has become the technology sector most closely watched by CPC leaders. Xi stressed, “Artificial intelligence is a strategic technology that leads this round of technological revolution and industrial transformation, possessing a strong ‘lead goose’ effect,” and asserted that “accelerating the development of a new generation of artificial intelligence is a strategic issue concerning whether our country can seize the opportunity of the new technological revolution and industrial transformation.”⁴³ The Chinese government encourages various sectors to utilize these data and integrate AI into their operations to boost productivity. In his 2024 work report, Premier Li Qiang emphasized the “AI+” strategy, urging the application of AI across all economic sectors.⁴⁴ Domestically, China is establishing its standards

36 The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping: Deepen Reform of the Science and Technology System to Enhance the Vitality of Scientific and Technological Innovation,” Xinhua, July 17, 2013, https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-07/17/content_2449985.htm.

37 The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “The National Security Law,” July 1, 2015, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-07/01/content_2888316.htm.

38 Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” Xinhua, October 27, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

39 Xi Jinping, “Forge ahead toward the grand goal of building a powerful nation in science and technology,” qsttheory, March 31, 2025, <http://www.qsttheory.cn/20250330/f377de1042cc451bb9840b495d33c731/c.html>.

40 Xi Jinping, “Xi Jinping: Speech at the 20th Congress of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the 15th Congress of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, and the 10th National Congress of the China Association for Science and Technology,” Xinhua, May 28, 2021, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-05/28/c_1127505377.htm.

41 Emily Jin, “A Policymaker’s Guide to China’s Technology Security Strategy,” itif, February 18, 2025, <https://itif.org/publications/2025/02/18/a-policymakers-guide-to-chinas-technology-security-strategy/>.

42 The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Emphasizes Accelerating the Development of New Quality Productive Forces and Steadfastly Advancing High-Quality Development at the 11th Group Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee,” Xinhua, February 1, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202402/content_6929446.htm.

43 Yu Huimin, “Seizing the ‘Leading Goose’ of the New Round of Scientific and Industrial Revolution: Series of Commentaries on Artificial Intelligence Development, Part One,” China Economic Net, December 8, 2018, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/08/content_5346910.htm.

44 Li Qiang, “Report on the Work of the Government - Delivered at the Second Session of the 14th National People’s Congress on March 5, 2024,” Xinhua, March 12, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202403/content_6939153.htm.

and benchmarks for AI; for instance, DeepSeek, with its groundbreaking R1 model, challenges established paradigms and has emerged as a leading participant in the field. Internationally, companies such as Huawei has launched an Arabic large language model (LLM) and Egypt's first public cloud service in Cairo,⁴⁵ and SenseTime is assisting Saudi Arabia in developing smart city infrastructures based on AI.⁴⁶ According to Chen Xiaoping, Director of the Robotics Laboratory at the University of Science and Technology of China, "Compared to previous industrial revolutions, in this round of technological upsurge led by artificial intelligence, China is, for the first time, on a level playing field with developed countries and currently possesses several key advantages."⁴⁷

4 China's Innovation Drive: A Political-Psychological and Cultural Perspective

Building on the preceding policy shifts, this section examines the underlying rationale shaping China's elevation of AI as a strategic priority within its governance model. The frameworks of Progressive Reductionism and the Sage-King Governance Paradigm are introduced to illuminate how China's political-psychological culture-particularly its emphasis on centralized authority and civilizational continuity-generates endogenous momentum for its AI strategy. These frameworks reveal a distinct path dependency in China's technological development, where AI is not merely a technical tool or political instrument, but a vehicle through which the state seeks to actualize an idealized vision of itself.

4.1 Progressive Reductionism

The conceptualization of progressive reductionism in the current study contains two core ideas: 1) Historical development is not linear; this non-linear progress represents a differentiated transformation of identity ($A=A'$); 2) Technology (B) acts as a mediator in the transformation process from A to A'. This conception rests on the view that history is not a linear or deterministic continuum, but a recursive process in which the future is shaped through symbolic returns to a reimagined past.⁴⁸ From its inception, a state is not merely a biological or natural formation-it is inscribed in language. As speaking subjects, its people articulate needs that are not solely their own, but always mediated through "the desire of the other." In voicing these desires, citizens project collective expectations onto the state, which internalizes these projections as an enduring source of propulsion. The founding moment of a state is thus marked by an ontological rupture-a loss that compels a continual return to the founding myth. This myth, far from being a static historical reference, is a utopian past retroactively shaped by the nation's imagined future, functioning as a symbolic compass for present identity and political purpose.

In this dynamic, utopia is not a detached fantasy but what Ernst Bloch terms a "concrete utopia."⁴⁹ This imaginative drive enables a nation to transform itself by striving toward an idealized version of its historical self. Žižek captures this logic through the notion of a "rearguard effect,"⁵⁰ where the meaning of events is constructed retroactively: the subject becomes what it imagines itself to be, not through mere imitation but through a continuous projection into the future. This paper expresses this transformative process as $A = A'$, where "=" signals not equivalence but a Hegelian mediation of identity⁵¹-an unfolding of the subject into its aspirational form. Technology (B) mediates this transformation, serving as the connective tissue between the past and future. Through this structure, high technology becomes more than a utilitarian asset-it is the medium through which the state enacts its ontological desire to become what it has always imagined itself to be.

P.1: The Schema of Progressive Reductionism (made by authors)

$$A \overset{B}{=} A'$$

45 Jack Dutton, "Huawei launches Egypt public cloud service as China ties grow," *AI-Monitor*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.ai-monitor.com/originals/2024/05/huawei-launches-egypt-public-cloud-service-china-ties-grow>

46 Jack Dutton, "Saudi tech giant expands investments into China, AI as part of \$100B plans," *AI-Monitor*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.ai-monitor.com/originals/2024/02/saudi-tech-giant-expands-investments-china-ai-part-100b-plans>.

47 Yang Jun, "Special Report: Three Questions on the Development of Artificial Intelligence," *Xinhua*, November 2, 2018, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-11/02/content_5336811.htm.

48 Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Critical theory and society*. (Routledge, 2020), 255-263.

49 Bloch, Ernst. *Das prinzip hoffnung*. Vol. 3, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959), 1089.

50 Žižek S. "Descartes and the post-traumatic subject", *Filozofski vestnik*, 29.2 (2008):10-29.

51 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, Arnold V. Miller, and John Niemeyer Findlay. *Phenomenology of spirit*, (Oxford University Press, 1977), 111-119.

4.2 Sage-King Governance: Chinese Style of Progressive Reductionism

Kitaro Nishida proposed the theory of “the absolute contradictory self-identity,”⁵² emphasizing that one can achieve a higher level of unity through self-negation (or a return to one’s heart). This characteristic encapsulates the psychology of East Asian Confucian culture. In comparing the modernization processes of China and Japan, Takeuchi Yoshiyuki characterized China as a “returning civilization.”⁵³ As Bloch noted, utopia embodies an ultimate dissatisfaction with the existing political order.⁵⁴ Confucian classics always remind people that reality is imperfect, and all the efforts of sages are aimed at bringing society back to the ancient state of harmony. This persistent awareness of the inherent imperfection of political reality compels people to see it as falling short of the ideals of their ancestors. Drawing on the classics such as the Book of Songs (詩) and the Book of Documents(書), Confucianism fabricated the concept of the “Three Dynasties (三代)” to restore a society that had strayed from its harmonious path. This “return” points to an internal spiritual transformation-civilization must achieve qualitative leaps through self-criticism and reflection rather than external expansion. The perfect society envisioned by Confucius is embodied in the Book of Rites⁵⁵:

“In the ideal Grand Union, a universal public spirit reigns, and leaders are chosen for their talent, virtue, and ability, speaking with sincerity and fostering harmony; people extend love and care beyond their own families-cherishing the elderly with lifelong support, providing the able-bodied with meaningful work, and ensuring that widows, orphans, the childless, and the disabled are compassionately maintained; men and women each fulfill their proper roles without interference; valuable goods are respected but not hoarded, and everyone labors willingly yet not solely for personal gain; as a result, selfish schemes are suppressed, crime disappears, and a society based on trust and shared welfare is established.”

Confucius believed that such a society could be achieved by establishing moral norms centered around “benevolence” (仁) and by governing with virtue under the guidance of a sage king. In Chinese self-theory, the “small self” (individual) does not exist independently. To become a “gentleman” (君子) or even a “sage” (圣人), the small self must harmonize and balance with the “great self” (大我), which represents the collective or the state. Both personal development and the realization of a return to an idealized state are mediated by sage-king governance, which connects the multitude of “small selves” with the singular “great self.”

Sage-king governance refers to a cultural-psychological notion wherein the state’s duty toward its people and the norms governing state power are two interrelated components. In terms of the state’s duty, it is believed that the government is responsible for the welfare of the people, and a regime that fails to protect the people’s well-being loses its “Mandate of Heaven.”⁵⁶ Regarding the organization of state power, there is an emphasis on selecting capable and virtuous leaders to govern the state; moreover, governance is seen as the responsibility of the “sage” (moral models and political elites), while ordinary people neither assume responsibility for state affairs nor possess the right to participate in political expression.⁵⁷ A key feature of Sage-King governance is its ethical nature: the ruler is seen not only as a sovereign but also as the greatest parental figure. This ethical dimension is manifested in the high value placed on moral education and the exemplary behavior of leaders. The legitimacy structure-placing the monarch and moral rectitude at the core while balancing other factors-expresses an ideal political model deeply ingrained as a collective aspiration and belief within the cultural tradition.⁵⁸

The public’s recognition of an abstract supreme authority-often embodied in a semi-divine monarch-forms a critical structural component of Chinese political psychology. Public evaluations of government performance tend to be consequentialist.⁵⁹ The public’s result-oriented mindset in evaluating political performance is closely tied to the Confucian injunction that state governance is sages’ duty rather than ordinary people. Bell contends that the political culture in China is deeply rooted in a meritocratic tradition where outcomes (tangible improvements in public welfare) are the ultimate benchmark.⁶⁰ In addition, the public perception of politics is not limited to whether individual needs are met but is based on the “mandate of heaven” type evaluation standard advocated by the Confucian tradition-such as economic development, social stability, and improved public services are paramount-which serve as benchmarks for assessing the performance of the central government.⁶¹ Even though

52 松本直樹. “重なりと透かし 西田幾多郎 『善の研究』 における過去と現在の関係について.” 西田哲学会年報, 10 (2013): 85-103.

53 Yoshiyuki, Takeuchi. *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. (Columbia University Press, 2005), 53-81.

54 Bloch, Ernst, et al. *The principle of hope*. Vol. 3. (Cambridge, MA: Mit Press, 1986), 1372-1376.

55 James Legge, “The Book Of Rites,” *Sacred Books of the East* vol. 27, 1885, <https://sacred-texts.com/cfu/liki/liki07.htm>.

56 De Bary, Wm Theodore, and Richard Lufano, eds. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 through the twentieth century*. (Columbia University Press, 2001), 427, 430-431.

57 Bell, Daniel A. *The China model: Political meritocracy and the limits of democracy*. (Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.; Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. *The sage and the people: The Confucian revival in China*. (Oxford University Press, 2015), 41-45.

58 Fukuyama, Francis. “Confucianism and democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, 6.2 (1995): 20-33.

59 Zhu, Yuchao. “Performance legitimacy” and China’s political adaptation strategy.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16 (2011): 123-140.

60 Bell, Daniel A. *The China model: Political meritocracy and the limits of democracy*. (Princeton University Press, 2015), 179-180.

61 Carter, Erin Baggott, Brett L. Carter, and Stephen Schick. “Do Chinese citizens conceal opposition to the CCP in surveys? Evidence from two experiments.” *The China Quarterly*, 259 (2024): 804-813.; Pan, Jennifer, and Yiqing Xu. “Gauging preference stability and ideological constraint

it is difficult to find a ruler in real life who fully conforms to this ideal, the enduring aspiration for sage-led governance persists among the Chinese people, and this political conception significantly influences how the public evaluates the CPC, forming one of the sources of its legitimacy.

This reductionist core did not vanish with China's transition to modernity; rather, it fused with imported Marxist theory to shape contemporary China's political–psychological culture. Marxism posits that social being determines social consciousness and that historical progress unfolds according to objective laws—subject only to acceleration or delay. Within this framework, restoring an ideal ancient society is not a return to primitivism but a historical transcendence—realized through the evolution of productive forces, class struggle, and civilizational development—by which the state moves toward becoming its aspirational self. The Marxist vision of a classless, communal society closely echoes the Confucian ideal of harmonious order—emphasizing the elimination of hierarchy, public ownership, and distribution by need. Contemporary CPC narratives, such as the “Two Centenary Goals,” frame this convergence as a civilizational continuity, positioning the “moderately prosperous society” as both a Marxist target and an ancient aspiration.⁶² Despite growing concerns over technology's darker consequences—environmental degradation, social dislocation, moral erosion—this synthesis of Marxist historicism and Confucian reductionism has entrenched a dominant, almost uncritical belief in technological progress. This pattern becomes especially evident in China's AI policy-making.

4.3 *Progressive Reductionism across Paradigm Evolution of China's S&T Policy*

Building upon the theoretical fusion of Progressive Reductionism and the Sage King governance paradigm, this section identifies three distinct modes of reductionism as they have manifested across the PRC's technological development trajectory: Revolutionary Mobilizational Progressive Reductionism reduced social complexity to a singular revolutionary objective, compressing developmental gaps through ideological mobilization and centralized will; Low Profile Pragmatic Progressive Reductionism reduced political goals to economic performance and technological catch up, managing complexity through decentralization, experimentation, and market mediation; Holistic Securitized Progressive Reductionism reduces diverse technological, economic, and social domains to questions of national security and survival, re-integrating innovation, governance, and ideology under centralized strategic coordination.

From a chronological perspective, the first mode, Revolutionary Mobilizational Progressive Reductionism from 1949 to 1978, corresponded to the phase of military industrial consolidation. During this period, the Sage King logic was expressed primarily through ideological mobilization, with the pursuit of a return to an ideal order articulated through revolutionary struggle and the whole nation system. This logic subsequently shifted to Low Profile Pragmatic Progressive Reductionism during the period of market oriented modernization from 1978 to 2012. Domestically, the central leadership decentralized authority, granting local governments and market actors substantial autonomy and prioritizing economic development as the primary source of political legitimacy. Internationally, the Sage King function was reoriented toward cultivating a favorable external environment in order to attract global capital and facilitate integration into globalization. Technology in this period was treated largely as an instrument of economic catch up rather than geopolitical contestation.

Since 2012, in the phase of comprehensive securitization, the core logic has evolved into Holistic Securitized Progressive Reductionism, marked by a pronounced re-centralization of authority. This shift has been driven by a deteriorating external environment shaped by technological blockades and political containment led by the United States and its allies. In response, the state has advanced top level design under the framework of the holistic national security concept (总体国家安全观),⁶³ treating artificial intelligence and other core technologies as strategic instruments essential to sovereignty and national survival. This period is also characterized by renewed internal consolidation, as the central leadership intensifies ideological and political work, tightens Party discipline, and elevates expectations of revolutionary commitment and political combativeness among Party members.⁶⁴

4.4 *External Factors*

While the core of our study focuses on elucidating endogenous political-psychological drivers, we fully acknowledge that external environmental factors have played a critical regulating and catalytic role in the three paradigm shifts of China's S&T policy.

under authoritarian rule.” *21st Century China Center Research Paper* (2020), 1-46.

62 Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the International Academic Symposium Commemorating the 2565th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth and the Fifth General Assembly of the International Confucian Association,” Xinhua, September 24, 2014, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-09/24/content_2755666.htm

63 Xi Jinping, “Xi Jinping: Speech at the 20th Congress of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the 15th Congress of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, and the 10th National Congress of the China Association for Science and Technology,” Xinhua, May 28, 2021, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-05/28/c_1127505377.htm.

64 Xi Jinping, “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century,” Xinhua, November 16, 2021, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content_5651269.htm.

The first transition, from military industrial consolidation to market oriented modernization, unfolded amid profound external shocks, including the deterioration of Sino Soviet relations and the emergence of a global technological revolution. Confronted with external isolation and internal developmental stagnation, the governance logic recalibrated its source of legitimacy away from revolutionary mobilization toward economic construction and livelihood improvement, articulated through the discourse of “economic centralism” (以经济建设为中心).⁶⁵ This shift reflected a strategic reduction of ideological goals to development performance as the primary response to systemic vulnerability.

The second transition, from low profile pragmatic reductionism to holistic securitized reductionism, occurred under conditions of fading globalization dividends and an increasingly hostile external environment marked by technological blockades and political containment led by the United States and its allies. In response, governance discourse moved beyond growth maximization toward the dual imperative of development and security, captured in notions such as “balancing development and strategic autonomy” (统筹发展与安全).⁶⁶ Science and technology policy was accordingly reframed as a core domain of national security, rather than a neutral instrument of economic catch up. Viewed from this external perspective, these shifts should not be understood as ad hoc reactions, but as strategic recalibrations through which leadership legitimacy is evaluated against the capacity to navigate structural transformations in the international system. This transformation underpins the contemporary emphasis on “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴)⁶⁷ as a response to long cycle global competition. The following section examines how these dynamics are translated into China’s governance of artificial intelligence in the current era.

5 AI Policy Based on Sage-King Governance

This section examines China’s AI policy-making and the meteoric growth of its AI industry through the prism of sage-king governance, revealing the endogenous drivers behind this distinctive innovation model. At its core, collective leadership-embodied by the Politburo-appropriates Confucian ideals of moral rule and “monarchical wisdom” to justify top-down authority, aligning technological innovation with state-defined strategic imperatives while marginalizing alternative visions of progress. China’s AI trajectory is shaped by a co-innovation ecosystem that integrates state direction, state-owned enterprise anchoring, private sector initiative, expert advisory input, and deep involvement of universities and research institutes. The driving force of this model lies in the fusion of Marxist and Confucian legacies. The state forges a powerful association between technological progress and social harmony through authoritative discourse, institutionalizing a “technology as national rejuvenation” narrative that operates as both a discursive framework and a form of political correctness.

Before turning to the empirical analysis of the Chinese model, this study clarifies the operationalization of its core concepts. Sage King governance is examined through institutionalized elite learning, most clearly reflected in Politburo collective study sessions as a mechanism of consensus formation on emerging technologies; centralized strategic coordination, expressed through top level planning and state led resource mobilization; and performance based legitimacy, whereby governing authority is assessed primarily through outcomes such as growth, stability, and public service provision rather than procedural accountability. Progressive reductionism is operationalized through the discursive and temporal architecture of national strategies, notably in strategic narratives invoking civilizational recovery, such as national rejuvenation and Datong, and in teleological timelines that fix historical benchmarks, reducing complex futures to staged technological transitions linking an imperfect present to an idealized order.

5.1 Chinese-style AI Innovation

China attaches great importance to innovation in AI. Unlike the United States-where innovation is often driven by private enterprise and deregulation-China’s approach is characterized by strong state leadership. Scholars generally believe that China is leveraging AI to strengthen its capacity for social control and sustain its centralized regime.⁶⁸ This section demonstrates that the emergence of high technology poses opportunities and challenges for states, whose varied policy responses reflect external conditions and deeply rooted political culture and psychology behind the persistent inertia in national technology path preferences.

65 Zhao, Ziyang, “Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Report Delivered at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China”, Xinhua, September 25, 2021, <https://fuwu.12371.cn/2012/09/25/ART11348562562473415.shtml>.

66 Xi Jinping, “Upholding the Holistic Approach to National Security” in *The Governance of China IV*, Foreign Languages Press, 2022, 283.

67 Xi Jinping, “Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People” in *The Governance of China*, Foreign Languages Press, 2014, 56-57.

68 Zeng, Jinghan. “Securitization of artificial intelligence in China.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14.3 (2021): 417-445.; Crosston, Matthew. “Cyber colonization: The dangerous fusion of artificial intelligence and authoritarian regimes.” *Cyber, Intelligence, and Security Journal* 4.1 (2020): 149-171.

Since 1949, China's technological development has been profoundly shaped by a "sage-king governance" ethos, which centers on the belief that national progress hinges on the directive capacity of top leadership, which reinforces a top-down model that privileges elite judgment over institutional pluralism. Confucianism mandates that political authority be grounded in lifelong learning and moral cultivation, a principle the CPC has appropriated through its self-identification as a "learning party," which is a framing that reinforces its claim to epistemic legitimacy while consolidating ideological control. This approach is notably rare compared to Western governments; for instance, US presidents seldom convene cabinet meetings to discuss employment policy, political theory, or World Trade Organization reform-topics routinely featured in the Politburo study sessions.

Since Hu Jintao's tenure as General Secretary, the CPC's Politburo has held monthly or bimonthly collective study sessions, typically inviting professors, think tank scholars, and other experts to deliver lectures, underscoring the CPC's need for specialized technical expertise in the field. These sessions cover various topics, including economics, diplomacy, and security, with technological innovation emerging as a key agenda under Xi Jinping's leadership. In the context of intense international technological competition and Western technological blockades, the CPC has increasingly emphasized self-reliance and innovative technological innovation. In contrast, the four tech-themed sessions of the Hu era mostly focused on general topics such as "trends in scientific and technological development," "China's science and technology development strategy," and "strategic emerging industries."

Under Xi, by contrast, they usually dive deep into specific technologies, reflecting China's growing innovation capabilities and industrial competitiveness in cutting-edge fields. The speakers are almost always leading academic experts, suggesting Xi's recognition of the need for technical expertise in these subjects. These sessions mirror the party's policy priorities and serve as platforms for Xi to publicize his policy preferences regarding emerging technologies, mobilizing party leaders to reach consensus accordingly. In many cases, directives regarding these technologies have already been issued by Beijing, followed by more authoritative and detailed policy documents in the subsequent months or years.⁶⁹ Experts who brief the Politburo on technology often become semi-official spokespeople in their respective fields. After directly hearing Xi's viewpoints, they further disseminate these policies through academic conferences, media interviews, and policy commentary, thereby becoming reliable advocates for Xi's policies in the eyes of experts and the public.⁷⁰

To operationalize its strategic vision for AI, the Chinese central government has issued a series of policy directives, including the "Internet+ AI Three-Year Implementation Plan" (2016) and the landmark "New Generation AI Development Plan" (2017). These documents reflect the state's ambition to embed AI across governance and industry, particularly enhancing bureaucratic efficiency. Local governments have responded fiercely, vying to become national leaders in so-called "intelligent governance." For instance, Guangzhou has positioned itself at the forefront by integrating facial recognition and "AI + Robot" systems into commercial and regulatory processes-illustrating the rapid technologization of administrative power under the banner of innovation.⁷¹ In addition to its interest in AI technology, China's central government has made its willingness to shape public opinion clear. As the Chinese State Council's "New Generation AI Development Plan" points out⁷²: AI technologies can sense, forecast, and provide early warning of major situations for infrastructure facilities and social security operations; grasp group cognition and psychological changes promptly; and take the initiative in decision-making and reactions-which will significantly elevate the capability and level of social governance, playing an irreplaceable role in effectively maintaining social stability. Chinese official media frequently highlight positive narratives about AI, such as reuniting families with missing children or enhancing law enforcement efficiency, to cultivate public trust in emerging technologies. These celebratory accounts strategically frame AI as a benevolent force while downplaying concerns over privacy, surveillance, and the erosion of civil rights.

Moreover, China's relationship between the state and society has created a unique business ecosystem. Unlike in Western countries, Chinese policymakers typically do not involve market actors in formulating technology policies. Although public participation in discussions is recorded in environmental governance, such participation is nearly absent in technology policy. Analysis of the experts invited to various study sessions reveals that most presenters are university professors, experts from directly administered state institutions, or researchers from national-level institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In recent years, although some heads of state-owned enterprises or officials from government-affiliated non-profits have participated, private entrepreneurs have rarely appeared in these settings.

In Chinese political culture, businesses are traditionally viewed as prioritizing profit over virtue, rendering them unfit for governance, which is reserved for the morally cultivated sage. This worldview sustains the CPC's institutional preference for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) over private firms. SOEs are entrusted with leading roles in key national initiatives such as the

69 Neil Thomas, Feifei Hung, "Who Briefs Xi Jinping? How Politburo Study Sessions Help to Decode Chinese Politics," Asia Society Policy Institute, October 23, 2024, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/who-briefs-xi-jinping-how-politburo-study-sessions-help-decode-chinese-politics>.

70 Id.

71 "Guangzhou Enters a New Era of Fully Electronic Business Registration Powered by Artificial Intelligence and Robotics," Guangzhou Daily, October 11, 2017, http://www.gz.gov.cn/xw/gzyw/content/post_2844115.html.

72 The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Notice of the State Council on the Issuance of the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan," July 8, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-07/20/content_5211996.htm.

Belt and Road Initiative and “Made in China 2025,” reflecting their perceived alignment with state objectives. In contrast, despite their substantial contributions to economic growth, private enterprises remain under tighter political supervision and are often embedded with CPC organizations to ensure ideological compliance and political control.⁷³ This limited trust in the private sector is evident in 2019 policy directives that, while affirming the protection of private property rights, emphasized that private enterprises must align with the socialist market economy structure and promote party building within their organizations. This reflects the CPC’s insistence on maintaining ideological oversight and political subordination.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, many Chinese internet giants have secured full cooperation, as most companies have CPC committees to ensure their day-to-day operations remain under party direction.

Influenced by long-standing traditions of state–business cooperation and the cultural norm that “the people do not contend with officials民不与官斗,” internet giants are keen to join the “national AI team of China,” certified by the Ministry of Science and Technology to lead the “National AI Open Innovation Platform.” The government allocated a unique strategic domain to the first five teams—Baidu for autonomous driving, Alibaba for smart cities, Tencent for media imaging, iFlytek for intelligent speech, and SenseTime for intelligent vision.⁷⁵ In 2018 and 2019, this team expanded further to include more than ten major Chinese internet giants, such as Huawei, JD.com, and Xiaomi, as well as several start-ups.⁷⁶ This form of business–state relations enables China’s security apparatus to gain greater access to data held by private enterprises, reinforcing state control over digital resources and integrating corporate infrastructure into broader surveillance and governance systems.

In addition to private enterprises, universities and research institutions (such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences) form another primary arena for technological innovation. However, compared to the substantial financial support provided by Western enterprises for research institutions, China’s domestic enterprises generally have limited research and development (R&D) capabilities. Many Chinese industries remain in the mid-to-low segments of global value chains, and the R&D intensity of industrial enterprises with annual revenues exceeding 20 million RMB averages only 0.9%.⁷⁷ In other words, without government funding support, the capacity for innovative activities in Chinese universities and laboratories is severely limited. Within universities, the CPC exerts influence through a dual leadership system, wherein the party secretary is responsible for ideological work to ensure research aligns with party goals. Directly controlled institutions like the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) focus on supporting national priority areas, and many renowned companies—such as iFlytek (artificial intelligence), Lenovo (personal computers), Dawning (supercomputers), Cambricon (AI chips), and Loongson (CPU design)—were founded with CAS support. Matt Sheehan contends that China’s emergence as an “innovation powerhouse” is largely attributable to this state-driven impetus⁷⁸, while Tim Ruhlrig argues that “the role of the party–state should be considered the fourth virtue that has made China innovative.”⁷⁹

5.2 *From Within: The Endogenous Driver of AI Innovation and National Transformation*

China’s technological development has been marked by a state-led intervention model that exhibits strong institutional resilience. Rather than provoking significant institutional contestation, this model has consistently secured discursive legitimacy through effective governance and deep-rooted historical continuity. This legitimacy stems from the foundational logic of China’s strategic technological statecraft: in contrast to Western traditions that privilege individual autonomy and market-driven innovation, China’s political culture is shaped by a legacy of centralized authority and Confucian ideals that endorse an active, directive state. This tradition reinforces public expectations for the government to lead major societal transformations through top-level design and coordinated resource mobilization.

Western theorists have long debated a technological society’s utopian and dystopian aspects. Developing a technological society in the West has long encountered resistance from traditional values and philosophical skepticism. Classical liberal thinkers such as Locke regarded state power as a necessary evil, while Hayek’s concept of spontaneous order championed market autonomy over centralized intervention. Even within modern Western philosophy, critiques of tradition often align with a deep ambivalence toward technological progress. Kierkegaard portrayed the “modern man” as a fragmented and detestable

73 Jerome Doyon, “CCP branches out into private businesses,” East Asia Forum, August 11, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/08/11/ccp-branches-out-into-private-businesses/>.

74 The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Opinions of the State Council on Creating a Better Development Environment to Support the Reform and Development of Private Enterprises,” Xinhua, December 22, 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-12/22/content_5463137.htm.

75 Yang Qingqing, “New Batch of National AI Champions Announced: JD, Huawei, Xiaomi Among 10 Companies Selected,” 21jingji, August 29, 2019, <https://m.21jingji.com/article/20190829/herald/7e6e80a529133a8def7465522d701283.html>.

76 Id.

77 Arundel, Anthony, Suma Athreye, and Sacha Wunsch-Vincent, eds. *Harnessing public research for innovation in the 21st century: an international assessment of knowledge transfer policies*. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 35-67.

78 Matt Sheehan, “How China Became an Innovation Powerhouse,” Carnegie Endowment, January 10, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/01/10/how-china-became-innovation-powerhouse-pub-88761>.

79 Tim Ruhlrig, “The Sources of China’s Innovativeness,” German Council on Foreign Relations, October 31, 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/sources-chinas-innovativeness>.

figure⁸⁰, while Foucault saw modernity as inseparable from pervasive control systems.⁸¹ Ellul even described humans in modern technological societies as “new demons”-mature insects with no choice but to reproduce and die.⁸² These critiques articulate underlying existential anxieties of Western modernity, suggesting a tension marked by both pride in its creation and unease over its continual oscillation between formation and disintegration.⁸³

In contrast, Chinese modernity has emerged rapidly under favorable conditions, grounded in a cultural orientation that embraces technology not as an alien force but as a vital means for individual and collective actualization. In Chinese self-theory, the “small self” (individual identity) is not autonomous but gains significance only through its integration with the “big self” (social and cosmic identity). This relational conception views personal development as inseparable from social responsibility and collective harmony, emphasizing interdependence over individualism. Within this framework, technology is seen as a tool to elevate the individual into meaningful participation in broader social structures.

This orientation has fostered a distinct critical tradition. On one side, the Marxist–Leninist legacy frames technological development as a necessary and rational stage in historical progress, tightly linked to state-led modernization and collective consciousness. On the other side, this view complements, rather than contradicts, traditional Confucian reductionism, which holds that technological advancement must ultimately serve the higher goal of social harmony. Together, these two currents form a coherent worldview in which technological progress is not merely tolerated but actively embraced as essential to achieving both civilizational continuity and collective well-being. Xi Jinping has declared that technological innovation has brought China closer than ever to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁸⁴ However, this vision carries historical baggage. During the Mao era, the pursuit of national rejuvenation through technology led to destructive tensions between “red” (political loyalty) and “expert” (technical competence) credentials, resource waste from misguided campaigns like the “backyard furnaces,” and a flood of research projects driven by quantity over quality. Despite shifts in leadership styles and policy sophistication, this politicized and performative innovation pattern continues to shape China’s technological development under CPC rule.

Therefore, China’s rapid technological rise aligns with traditional and modern political philosophies, driven by sovereignty concerns and a deeper ideological foundation. This is reflected in strong public support for state-led innovation, where the government’s interventionist model has shown notable institutional resilience and sustained discursive legitimacy. Rooted in a Confucian tradition of centralized authority and collective purpose, this model contrasts with Western liberal ideals and fosters broad public acceptance of state dominance in planning, coordination, and technological transformation.

A previous survey indicated that approximately 80% of respondents supported establishing and implementing China’s “social credit system,” even though the system remains imperfect and some doubt its ability to achieve its stated objectives or its potential risks to individual privacy.⁸⁵ While Western societies are often concerned about the unchecked power and influence of large technology companies and the erosion of traditional values and privacy, in most cases, China exhibits the opposite tendency. A recent typical example is that while Western societies vigorously opposed effective measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, China implemented dynamic zero-COVID policies and rapidly developed and applied zero-COVID technologies with strong public support.⁸⁶ There is a widespread belief that technological innovation-especially application-oriented-is critical to achieving good governance, including anti-corruption, poverty alleviation, and market facilitation. The government actively shapes public perceptions of technological development, closely linking the fortunes of domestic technology companies with national rejuvenation. In addition to AI, major technological advancements such as 5G and new energy vehicles are lauded, with brands like Huawei being regarded as national pride. In many cases, when Chinese products are blocked internationally, domestic sales surge-a reflection of the public’s fervent technological patriotism.

However, not all technological innovations or actions by technology companies receive public approval; the public sometimes expects the government to adopt strong and effective measures to regulate them, which is the state’s responsibility. New legal policies against digital monopolies and anti-trust measures designed to curb unfair competition and governance-damaging practices often receive strong public support-for example, in November 2019, Beijing first capped under-18s’ online gaming to 90 minutes per weekday and three hours total on weekends and holidays⁸⁷; on 7 February 2021, the State Council issued the world’s first antitrust guidelines for the platform economy, outlawing “choose-one” exclusivity, algorithmic price discrimination,

80 Westphal M. *Kierkegaard’s critique of reason and society*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 42.

81 Nilsson J, Wallenstein S-O, editors. *Foucault, biopolitics and governmentality*. (Flemingberg: Södertörn University Press, 2013), 1-204.

82 Ellul J. *The New Demons*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 6-7.

83 Mahoney, Josef Gregory. “China’s rise as an advanced technological society and the rise of digital orientalism.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 28.1 (2023): 1-24.

84 Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Joint Session of the 19th Meeting of the Members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the 14th Meeting of the Members of the Chinese Academy of Engineering,” *Xinhua*, May 28, 2018, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-05/28/content_5294322.htm.

85 Kostka, Genia. “China’s social credit systems and public opinion: Explaining high levels of approval.” *New media & society* 21.7 (2019): 1565-1593. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3215138.

86 Ip, Greg, “China’s ‘Zero-Covid’ Policy Holds Lessons for Other Nations,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-zero-covid-policy-holds-lessons-for-other-nations-11645033130>.

87 Li Hongyang, “Stricter limits on minors’ online gaming,” *China Daily*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202108/30/WS612cc4a0a310efa1bd66c215.html>.

predatory subsidies and data-driven abuse of dominance⁸⁸; in early July 2021, China's Cyberspace Administration launched a national-security cybersecurity review of ride-hailing giant Didi Chuxing, ordering its app removed from stores and new-user registrations suspended⁸⁹; and on 23 July 2021, the government rolled out its "double reduction" policy, barring for-profit after-school tutoring in core compulsory-education subjects.⁹⁰ While these governance measures have garnered public support, they also reveal the paternalistic logic of the Sage-King governance paradigm in which the state positions itself not merely as an administrator of public affairs but as the patriarch of a national family-blurring the line between political authority and moral guardianship, and leaving little room for autonomous civic agency.

6 Intelligence with Chinese and American Characteristics

This section introduces the United States—a familiar AI power—as a comparative reference point to better illuminate the endogenous drivers of China's AI innovation (Table 1). This section conducts a comparative analysis of China and the US across key dimensions. First, China's foundational myth, grounded in Confucianism, aspires to revive the ideal of a harmonious "Great Union" society. In contrast, the US draws from Protestant ethics and the belief in "American exceptionalism," seeking to embody a global "City upon a Hill."⁹¹ These divergent civilizational imaginaries inform their respective self-theories: China emphasizes the integration of the "small self" (individual) into the "great self" (collective and cosmic), whereas the US privileges the distinction between "self" and "other," leaving space for the contestation of individual autonomy.⁹²

Second, these philosophical foundations shape divergent technological imaginaries. In China, AI is framed as a vehicle for national rejuvenation and moral restoration. Yet, this vision often masks a more profound logic of control, where technological progress is tightly bound to political consolidation and state authority. Legitimacy in this context is results-oriented, measured by economic performance and social order, which can justify intrusive governance in the name of stability. In contrast, the US treats AI as a tool for maintaining global leadership or addressing strategic uncertainty⁹³ within a framework that values process-oriented legitimacy. As a result, while American political culture seeks to constrain state power, Chinese political culture tends to valorize a strong, interventionist state and technocratic paternalism.

These differences also shape the two countries' innovation models. China relies on top-down state investment, national strategic planning, and integrating state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and academic institutions, reflecting a centralized approach to technological advancement. In comparison, technological innovation in the US shows a pattern of decentralized, multi-actor system where universities, industry, and government interact⁹⁴; cluster-based ecosystems drive localized dynamism; open innovation theories explain firm-level strategies and public interventions⁹⁵ reflecting the primary role of the firm as the subject of innovation in the American cultural concept. While a competitive environment can foster rapid innovation, it can also lead to the uneven distribution and adoption of AI technologies. Scholars demonstrate that China's single-party governance allows faster AI policy enactment and deployment, leaving the US encumbered by regulatory fragmentation and legislative gridlock.⁹⁶ Webster believes that the separation of government, academia, and industry in the US has hindered the development of a coordinated AI strategy⁹⁷, while Scharf finds that US industrial policy remains piecemeal and China's centralized Five-Year Plans and "national team" initiatives drive rapid AI infrastructure build-out.⁹⁸

88 "China Unveils Anti-Trust Guidelines on the Platform Economy," Xinhua, February 7, 2021, https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202102/07/content_WS601ffe31c6d0f72576945498.html

89 Ma Si, "Internet platforms targeted in data security reviews," China Daily, July 12, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202107/12/WS60eb7f32a310efa1bd66115c.html>.

90 "China issues guidelines to ease burden on young students," Xinhua, July 24, 2021, https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202107/24/content_WS60fc16dfc6d0df57f98dd873.html.

91 Van Engen, Abram C. *City on a hill: A history of American exceptionalism*. Yale University Press, 2020; <https://www.neh.gov/article/how-america-became-city-upon-hill>.

92 Jacobsen, Jeppe T., and Katrine Nørgaard. "Reading Security Imaginaries as Fantasies—Loss, Desire, and Enjoyment in the Military Quest for Explainable AI." *Millennium* 52.2 (2024): 408-433.

93 Brown, Venetia, et al. "A Qualitative Study on Cultural Hegemony and the Impacts of AI." *Proceedings of the AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society*. 7.1 (2024): 159-170.; Wicaksono, Adityo, and Tommy Hendrix. "The hegemony in artificial intelligence technology: a depiction through patent analysis." *International Journal of Foresight and Innovation Policy* 16.2-4 (2023): 152-165.

94 Etzkowitz, Henry, and Loet Leydesdorff. "The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and "Mode 2" to a Triple Helix of university–industry–government relations." *Research policy*, 29.2 (2000): 109-123.

95 Chesbrough, Henry William. *Open innovation: The new imperative for creating and profiting from technology*. (Harvard Business Press, 2003), 43.

96 Allison, Graham, and Eric Schmidt. "Is China beating the US to AI supremacy?." *Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, (2020): 1-20.

97 "The USA–China AI Race – 7 Weaknesses of the West," Emerj Artificial Intelligence Research, May 13, 2019. <https://emerj.com/the-usa-china-ai-race/>

98 Scharf, Shirley Anne. "Artificial Intelligence and Innovation Policy: A Comparative Perspective." *Democracy*, (2025), 1-17.

Table 1: Comparative Table: China vs. United States (made by authors)

	China	United States
Foundational Myth	Great Union	City upon a Hill
Cultural Roots	Confucianism	Protestant ethic
Theory of self	"Small self" finds meaning only through integration into the "Great self" (society and cosmos)	Autonomous individual ("self" distinguished from "other"), with personal rights and self-determination paramount
Governance Model	Sage-King Governance: tightly bound to social order and political consolidation	Dec: skepticism of concentrated power
The meaning of AI	Instrument of national rejuvenation and moral restoration	Strategic tool for maintaining global leadership and managing uncertainty
Public Legitimacy	Result-oriented	Process-oriented
Innovation Drivers	State-Mobilized: centralized R&D investment, strategic planning, and integration of SOEs and academia	Market-Anchored: corporate R&D, venture capital, competitive clusters, and open innovation

7 Conclusion

Unlike dominant accounts that frame China's AI strategy regarding techno-nationalism, strategic rivalry, or regime survival, this paper contends that China's approach is driven by a civilizational aspiration for self-actualization—an effort to return to a harmonized order through technological advancement. In this view, AI is a strategic resource and a symbolic medium of national rejuvenation, embedded in a broader quest to align present conditions with an idealized projection of the past. The paper traced this logic across three key paradigms in China's S&T policy: military-industrial consolidation (1949–1978), market-oriented modernization (1978–2012), and comprehensive securitization (2012–present). Despite their differences, all three consistently rely on centralized leadership, a pattern reinforced by a political culture that prioritizes order, meritocratic authority, and moral paternalism. Within this configuration, China's AI governance model is elite-led, state-coordinated, and discursively framed as "technology is national rejuvenation." It is characterized by technocratic legitimacy, strategic integration of state-owned and private actors, and a developmental narrative that positions AI as a solution to social contradictions rather than a threat.

More crucially, by introducing and applying the *Sage-King Governance Paradigm* and the *Progressive Reductionist Framework*, the study offers a conceptual reorientation that foregrounds the internal cognitive structures and cultural traditions shaping China's AI governance. These frameworks illuminate how legitimacy, strategic orientation, and public acceptance of technological development are historically and culturally conditioned. The *Progressive Reductionist* logic posits that state development is propelled by a retroactive mythic horizon—an imagined origin that functions as an ever-present "desire of the other," driving societal transformation with technology acting as the mediating force. This process is culturally institutionalized in a *Sage-King* political imaginary in which quasi-divine leadership is believed to embody moral authority and channel collective will to restore a lost cultural ideal. The comparative analysis with the US further underscores how foundational myths, theories of self, and legitimacy regimes generate divergent innovation logics. While the US model is anchored in individual autonomy, market pluralism, and procedural legitimacy, the differences between Chinese and the US models produce distinct approaches to AI—not just in policy design but in how technology is imagined, authorized, and socially embedded.

These findings have significant policy implications for both Chinese authorities and international stakeholders. For Chinese policymakers, aligning AI initiatives with shared national values and historical narratives can reinforce public legitimacy and clarify China's objectives to foreign audiences. For international leaders and organizations, recognizing that China's AI strategy is driven by an inward-looking civilizational vision, not solely by competitive ambition and fostering more culturally informed engagement and cooperation. For example, when negotiating global AI standards or ethical guidelines, explicitly acknowledging China's worldview may help identify common ground or clarify points of disagreement. Ultimately, emphasizing mutual interests and establishing cooperative channels (for instance, joint research programs or shared safety protocols) can promote constructive competition and turn cultural differences into opportunities for collaboration, thereby building trust and more resilient international AI governance frameworks.

However, this study's conceptual approach also has important limitations. First, framing China's AI trajectory in terms of deep cultural narratives risks overgeneralization or cultural essentialism: Chinese society and politics are diverse and dynamic, and not all outcomes can be traced to a monolithic cultural logic. Second, the Sage-King governance and Progressive Reductionist frameworks are theoretical constructs based on historical interpretation, making empirical verification challenging. Future research could address this by conducting surveys, elite interviews, or discourse analyses to assess whether these political-psychological patterns resonate with Chinese policymakers or the public. Finally, this study's focus on China limits its

generalizability. Comparative analyses in other civilizational contexts (for example, India, Japan, or Western democracies) could test whether analogous mythic horizons and leadership imaginaries influence technology policies elsewhere. Such comparative work would help clarify how cultural worldviews, institutional factors and political psychology shape divergent national AI trajectories.