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Editorial

BIG DATA & SOCIETY

Big Data & Society
July–September 1–6
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DOI: 10.1177/20539517261478112
journals.sagepub.com/home/bds

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Demystifying big data in China: Infrastructure, labour and social change

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Abstract

To date, much of the discussion of big data in China remains caught between fears of authoritarian threats and dreams of developmental alternatives. Such mythifications reduce China's techno-development to a monolithic, state-led master plan, and conceal the labour, frictions and relations of power these data infrastructures depend on. Drawing on infrastructure studies, this Special Theme approaches data infrastructures as relational, contingent and socio-material arrangements through which datafication sustains capital accumulation, governance and power. Bringing together seven fieldwork-informed empirical articles and a commentary, the collection examines data infrastructures, data labour and data for social change in and from China, ranging from the artificial intelligence annotation industry to smart farming, rural governance and environmental activism, as well as the expansion of Chinese networks and platforms into the Global South. Reading across these contributions, this editorial argues that framing these related processes via the concept of infrastructural capitalism moves the debate beyond a singular 'China model' by specifying how power is produced, exercised and contested through infrastructures at home and abroad. Using China as a case and starting point, this Special Theme also lays the groundwork for more broadly theorising the politics of infrastructural capitalism across techno-developmental regimes.

Keywords

Data infrastructures, big data practices, infrastructural capitalism, labour, infrastructural power, China

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Introduction

Infrastructural development is central to China's pursuit of capital accumulation, techno-nationalist ambition, and geopolitical influence (Pun, 2024). In popular and political discourses, digital infrastructures, together with the big data practices they enable, remain caught between fears of authoritarian threats and dreams of developmental alternatives. For its critics, China symbolises a techno-dystopia in which data infrastructures serve as instruments of political control, emblematised by the U.S. media portrayal of the social credit system as an Orwellian panopticon (Von Blomberg and Liu, 2026). This dystopian imaginary travels to the Digital Silk Road initiatives – where Huawei-built 'safe cities' across Africa are read as Beijing's exported digital authoritarianism (Feldstein, 2021) – and to the race for artificial intelligence (AI) development, where the U.S. government has cast China's AI ambitions as a national security threat. The Chinese state, for its part, projects an equally exceptionalist self-image, celebrating its digital

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economy as a 'China model' for the world (People's Daily, 2017) and a foundation for South–South cooperation (Strange, 2024). Despite serving distinct ends, such mythifications reduce China's techno-development to a monolithic, state-led master plan, essentialising it as 'the mystical Other' (Qiu, 2022: 27). They also conceal the labour, frictions and relations of power constitutive of these infrastructures.

Critical data studies have long traced the co-constitution and circulation of power through data infrastructures and practices (Iliadis and Russo, 2016; Milan and Treré, 2022). Scholars have noted the concentration of data infrastructures in the Global North (Brodie, 2023); the sociotechnical imaginaries that legitimise infrastructural development and governance (Lei, 2023; Micheli et al., 2020; Qing and Chan, 2026) and their disconnection from local practices (Große-Bley and Kostka, 2021; Milan and Treré, 2022); the invisible data labour that sustains infrastructures (Gray and Suri, 2019; Le Ludec et al., 2023; Tubaro et al., 2020), and how technology companies expand their governance capacities through infrastructuralisation (Plantin et al., 2018; Van der Vlist et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship calls for theorisations that value knowledge not from the Global North, but from the Global Majority world (Milan and Treré, 2022; Poell et al., 2025; Valente and Grohmann, 2024; Zhang and Yuan, 2025). They emphasise the need to multiply reference points by attending to the plurality of local and regional trajectories of datafication such as those in China. To be clear, our aim is not to suggest that China is understudied. Quite the opposite: its rise as one of the global technological powerhouses has made it a recurrent scholarly topic, often invoked either as a counterpoint to Silicon Valley or as a familiar variant of platform capitalism. Instead, we seek to use the lens of China to better understand the variety of data infrastructure in the world and provide a possible framing for subsequent research on techno-developmental regimes. Writing about 'Global China as method', Franceschini and Loubere (2022) urge scholars to reimagine China 'from a more contextualised global, historical, and relational perspective', tracing 'the linkages and parallels, continuities and evolutions, as well as the ruptures, resulting from the intensification of Chinese entanglements in the global system' (p. 58; see also Lee, 2022; Liu and Luo, 2025). This calls for what Qiu (2022: 37) terms a 'conflictive lens' that examines 'the dialectics of data power and counter-power' across geopolitical competition and internal class struggle.

Taking up these commitments, this special theme brings together research articles and reflections that examine the social construction of data infrastructures, data labour practices and data for social change *in/from* China. Following infrastructure studies (Hallinan and Gilmore, 2021; Larkin, 2013; Rippa and Oakes, 2023; Star, 1999), we approach data infrastructures as relational, contingent, and socio-material arrangements that enable datafication processes that sustain capital accumulation, governance and power relations. We also draw on Simone's (2004) concept of 'people as infrastructure' or Pun's (2024) concept of infrastructural power of labour to highlight data workers and other individuals often rendered peripheral (e.g. data subjects and activists), whose collective practices and social relations not only constitute these systems but also open spaces of contestation within them.

Our collection of empirical articles employs ethnographic approaches to examine how infrastructures with different degrees of (in)visibility (Larkin, 2013) take shape and become routinised (Star, 1999), ranging from the spectacular (e.g. the Digital Silk Road and RuralStar in Ghana) to the unseen (e.g. data annotation behind AI production) and everything in between (e.g. state-led and grassroots data initiatives). Symbolically, these infrastructures are fuelled by desires that 'encode the dreams of individuals and societies' and 'stand as filters through which the object is seen' (Larkin, 2013: 331). Rather than simply presuming invisibility as an inherent condition or characteristic of data infrastructures, we ask how and when they are made (in)visible, and to what political ends. Using China as a starting point, this collection seeks to move beyond data universalism (Milan and Treré, 2022; Valente and Grohmann, 2024), theorising the multiplicity of data infrastructures, labour practices and data politics from the Global Majority world.

Reading China through infrastructural capitalism

The collection builds on and contributes to the theorisation of 'infrastructural capitalism', which can be understood as a response to crises of overproduction and legitimation, particularly in the wake of the 2008–2009 Great Recession (Pun, 2024). As Pun (2024) writes, Chinese capitalism has entered a new phase, one that builds 'fundamentally on the production of physical and digital infrastructures, either spearheaded or aided significantly by the Chinese state' (p. 344). In particular, the state has increasingly played an interventionist role in financing and building infrastructure in China and in more than 100 other countries (Strange, 2024). These infrastructural projects vary in scale and visibility, ranging from high-profile flagship economic infrastructures such as roads, telecommunications networks and the Digital Silk Road initiatives to prestige projects such as national-level entertainment venues and government buildings (Strange, 2024). In both forms, such projects are often promoted as engines of economic transformation, since economic performance remains a central source of China's political legitimacy (Lei, 2023).

Of particular relevance here are digital infrastructures, which are framed as means to advance industrial upgrading and facilitate local governance, with policy frameworks

such as the 'Internet Plus', 'Made in China 2025' and 'Digital China' institutionalising this framing (Hong, 2017; Lei, 2023; Yuan and Zhang, 2025). In 2020, the State Council further designated data as 'a factor of production' alongside land, labour, capital and technology (Chen, 2022). Outside China, infrastructural projects, often financed by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private firms such as Huawei, prioritise connectivity and extend China's global reach through financialisation and standard-setting (de Seta, 2023; Strange, 2024). As Lee (2022) argues, such foreign infrastructural investment becomes 'a spatial fix for Chinese capital flow and consolidation of state power, masking fiscal transfers to SOEs as development aid, and trumpeting a 'win-win' discourse of mutual benefits' (p. 318).

Infrastructural capitalism, nevertheless, goes beyond a story of the 'China Model' for at least four reasons. First, as Strange (2024: 4) contends, 'many existing accounts assume that infrastructure creates Chinese influence but do not specify how this occurs', likely because they tend to analyse central policy frameworks and outcomes. Such accounts capture the techno-nationalist shaping of digital infrastructures, but they may overlook the contradictory desires and interests of multiple actors as well as the data practices through which these infrastructures are made, maintained and contested on the ground. They may also miss how different infrastructures enact distinct cultural politics through their varying (in)visibility (Hallinan and Gilmore, 2021): hypervisibility of the spectacular can carry cultural imaginaries of techno-developmental progress, while invisibility naturalises the labour and asymmetries that sustain them.

Second, just as the Chinese state can deepen its power through infrastructural projects, the working class can also exercise infrastructural power, that is, the capacity to disrupt or rework accumulation from its position within infrastructural systems (Pun, 2024). Building on Simone's (2004) 'people as infrastructure', we extend this form of infrastructural agency to not only data workers but also data subjects and grassroots activists whose practices both sustain and contest these arrangements.

Third, the spatial extension of Chinese infrastructural capitalism does not unfold as orderly replication abroad. As several contributors to this collection show, where Chinese capital, technology and policy meet local conditions in Ghana, India and Indonesia, the encounters produce contradictory and reactive configurations rather than the smooth export of a 'China model'.

Fourth, attending to infrastructures shifts the analytical lens from specific policy instruments to power mechanisms embedded in relational and socio-material configurations. This provides a comparative basis for understanding infrastructural capitalism. Domestically, the coordinated state-firm production of digital infrastructure as an engine of capital accumulation echoes post-war East Asian developmental states (Lei, 2023). Internationally, the channelling of surplus capital and industrial overcapacity through developmental aid, loans and infrastructural projects operates as a geopolitical technique comparable to Unites States' development assistance, reproducing structural asymmetries (Lee, 2022).

Reading China through infrastructural capitalism, therefore, moves us beyond debates about Chinese exceptionalism toward analytical resources for examining potential tensions between different actors' desires and big data practices across different scales and sites. This provides both a key example and framework for studying data infrastructures beyond the Global North.

Overview of the contributions

The special theme opens with a commentary by Arora and He (2025), titled 'Geography of digital hope: An optimistic perspective on digital labour and infrastructure from the Global South'. In this piece, the authors propose the concept of 'geographies of digital hope' to reconceptualise digital infrastructures through the everyday practices of the marginalised majority in the Global South. Challenging the dominant pessimistic bias in Western scholarship – which often foregrounds extraction and exploitation while overlooking agency – they counterpose 'algorithms of aspiration' and 'surveillance of care'. Through examples of content creators, gig workers and feminist activists, they argue that hope and precarity are bound together in everyday digital life, with hope often emerging from the very conditions that constrain it. Building on Arora and He's invitation for more nuanced and grounded approaches to researching digital infrastructure and labour, this special theme brings together seven empirical case studies, which we organised into three sub-thematic sections: (1) Data Labour Behind AI Production, (2) Big Data Infrastructures and Practices for Social Change, and (3) The Geopolitics of Data Infrastructures.

The first section turns to China's data annotation industry, an increasingly formalised labour force that powers the country's competitive AI sector. The Chinese government has announced plans to expand the sector, build high-quality datasets, and set national standards for emerging AI-related occupations. By 2025, national data annotation pilot bases had been set up in cities including Chengdu, Shenyang and Changsha (National Data Administration of China, 2026). Yet, the labour conditions of these workers remain largely out of view. In 'From planetary to state-embedded AI stacks: The re-territorialisation of China's data annotation industry', Fu and Lin (2026) draw on multi-sited ethnography and interviews to study how state, market and worker logics together remake data annotation as an institutionalised component of state-governed digital infrastructure, rather than mirroring the patterns of outsourcing and offshoring documented elsewhere. While this formalisation process gives annotators contractual recognition, it does not guarantee job stability

or autonomy. Another paper by Xia and Wu (2025), 'The platformisation tree in China's AI data annotation ecosystem', follows people with disabilities who engage in annotation work. Drawing on 3 years of fieldwork, the authors map a multi-layered ecosystem: central government forms the root, the interplay between local authorities and tech capital constitutes the trunk, and several Disabled People's Organisations emerge as the branches. They found that disabled annotators are positioned as leaves at the periphery, exposed at once to new forms of inclusion and to increased vulnerability.

The second section brings together three papers that examine how big data infrastructures are imbued with aspirations for social change and how these ambitions are pursued through diverse social actors. In 'The data fix: Smart farming and the sociotechnical politics of datafication and assetization', Zhang and Lan (2026) take us to Gutian, where big data is mobilised to transform the region's mushroom industry. Their study underscores the role of digital infrastructures and data practices in reconfiguring land ownership, reshaping state power and facilitating new forms of capitalist accumulation. Their theorisation of data as both a speculative asset and a political instrument also echoes Pun's (2024) account of how the state reproduces capitalist relations through the infrastructures it governs. Then, Min Zhou (2025), in 'Dancing with anklets: Navigating digital rural governance with big data in China', explores the digital transformation of governance in rural China at a national pilot site for China's Digital Village Strategy. The paper demonstrates that digital grid governance is sustained by the everyday data collection practices and relational labour of frontline officials. In practice, big data-empowered governance often operates more as a symbolic performance of administrative achievement than as a pragmatic tool for improving governance efficiency. While the first two articles focus on state-led infrastructural projects, Yu Sun's (2026) contribution, 'Environmental data as a relational mediator of contentious publicness: Data curation and environmental data activism', shifts our attention to civil society's engagement with data infrastructures. Based on her participatory observation and semi-structured interviews with members of a Beijing-based environmental non-government organisation, Sun depicts how data activism unfolds in the Chinese context, highlighting the relational and often non-confrontational tactics adopted by grassroots organisations.

In the third section, we move beyond China to witness how Chinese infrastructural capitalism unfolds abroad, encountering the complexities of South–South engagements along the way. In 'Infrastructuring the last mile: State, Chinese tech, and densification of Ghana's rural network', we follow Miao Lu (2026) to Ghana, where Huawei was involved in a local large-scale telephony project. Through ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, Lu offers a vivid picture of the multi-layered and often contradictory techno-politics of last-mile datafication in contemporary Ghana. The Ghanaian state politicises the digital divide to shore up its legitimacy, whereas Huawei deliberately depoliticises its role to protect corporate interests amid geopolitical tensions. Finally, shifting beyond the earlier focus on physical infrastructuring, Weidi Zheng's (2025) article, 'Mosaic of state power: How "new" state capitalism shapes global tech capital', traces China's 'Digital Silk Road', particularly the expansion of Chinese digital platforms and tech capital, in India and Indonesia. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the study empirically shows how China's digital expansion unfolds as a reactive process shaped by intertwined domestic priorities and international dynamics. Together, the two studies show that Chinese infrastructural capitalism is made and contested abroad by various relevant social groups, as it is at home.

Conclusion

Through ethnographic fieldwork, the collection of articles renders visible the infrastructures and labour that ordinarily go unseen, demystifying datafication in and from China by foregrounding its contingencies and frictions. It also identifies theoretical and empirical commonalities between China's techno-development and its counterparts both within and beyond the Majority World.

While we are not the first to study data infrastructures and practices through rich and in-depth ethnographic studies, our work builds on contributions published in *Big Data & Society* that examine algorithms as culture (Seaver, 2017), algorithms in practice (Christin, 2017) and the anthropology of big data (Pedersen, 2023). Our theoretical orientation is also informed by recent edited themes on social data governance in China (Liu and Wang, 2022), infrastructural politics in cultural studies (Hallinan and Gilmore, 2021) and infrastructural thinking in China studies (Rippa and Oakes, 2023).

Nevertheless, this special theme scrutinises how a wide range of actors, including the state, local governments, civil society, workers and data subjects, mobilise data practices to (re)construct and contest data infrastructures on the ground. By doing so, it contributes a nuanced understanding of the dynamic and contested nature of data infrastructures, highlighting the material and relational politics of datafication in and from China. By studying data infrastructures beyond China's borders, we also bring critical data studies into rethinking China's infrastructural capitalism and its relationship with the Global South. China, on this reading, figures less as a bounded case than as one critical node in global techno-development, whose infrastructural politics must be theorised relationally. Future research might therefore trace the variegation of infrastructural capitalism. This requires asking not only how data infrastructures are built, maintained and contested under distinct techno-developmental

regimes, but also how power is exercised through the embedding and asymmetric interdependence of these infrastructures across multiple scales.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank *Big Data & Society*'s editorial team and anonymous reviewers for their support and feedback. We are also grateful to the authors of this Special Theme.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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