

## ***Social Media + Society Special Issue Call For Paper***

### **Platform Economies in Digital Asia**

#### **Editors**

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#### **Call**

The “platform turn” across many disciplines around 2010s thrust to the forefront a new framework for understanding a distinct set of technological, economic, discursive practices of post-industrial digital economy. Early works in a fast-growing area of platform studies focused on the role of digital technology in organizing production and constructing (thereby distorting) the market in a growing range of social economic sectors. Silicon Valley platforms such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon often serve as the poster boys for how the platform exerts its power of algorithmic control, datafication, and financialization in shaping new organizational forms.

The understanding of platforms as the new frontiers of the globalized digital economy has only gained further depth and nuances when situated outside the epicenter of Silicon Valley in other parts of the world, especially Asia, the world’s fastest growing region. Researchers, for example, traced the origins of the concept to the Japanese car industry and delineated an East Asian genealogy of platformization embedded in the historical trajectory towards post-Fordist flexible accumulation (Steinberg, 2019). The broad political economic approach to platform economy as a new form of social contract between the state, capital, and labor is being mapped out in, for instance, India and China, two economic powerhouses in the region. Indeed, empirical evidence from these countries informs us that, instead of being paradigmatically new, digital platforms often graft themselves onto existing regimes of production and exchange (e.g. Zhang, 2021) and reinvent local and traditional forms of the marketplace (e.g. Athique, 2019).

Additionally, the thesis of infrastructuralization of platforms takes on concrete forms as governments in the region work with private platforms to provide infrastructures necessary for realizing their social projects, be it efficient governance, poverty reduction, or economic restructuring. Here capitalist tendencies of monopoly through network externalities and the impetus toward commodification of informal service markets and gray economies are likely subject to regulatory regimes serving different social imaginaries. The distinction between an infrastructure for public interests and a platform for private profits often manifests in the concrete interactions of state policy, corporate initiatives, and citizen participation in diverse local contexts (e.g. Mukherjee, 2019; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). Meanwhile, the informal labor regimes of the platforms prove to rely as much on the technical process of datafication and algorithmic control as on specific local dynamics, such as an energized urban middle-class consumers and impoverished rural economies after decades of economic liberalization in the region (e.g. Chen & Qiu, 2019; Yasih, 2022).

The variegated local experiences, dynamism and heterogeneity of platform economies in Asia both complement and challenge Silicon Valley-centered narratives. They interrogate assumptions underpinning the mainstream platform studies while firmly situating “platform

capitalism” in the extension and convergence of long-term tendencies in the history of global capitalism and in diverse local social and cultural contexts.

At the same time, the engagement with the interdisciplinary conversation of platform studies carries the promise of re-energizing Asian studies to better grapple with some of its major challenges in Anglophone academia. Post-Cold-War Asian Studies has been driven by various agenda to shake off its orientalist and Cold War origins and their tenacious influences on how we produce knowledge about Asia (Schneider and Goto-Jones, 2015; Ludden, 1997). While much of the new Asian studies was folded into new discourses of globalization and post-colonial hybridity, others found ethical urgency in deploying “Asia as method,” calling for critical engagement with the “heterogenous Asian situation,” recognition of continued external and internal forces of colonialism and imperialism, and multiplication of “frames of references in our subjectivity and understanding” (Chen, 223; Anderson, 448). Commenting on what he calls the “new area studies,” South Asianist David Ludden observed that it constitutes some of “the most creative venues for studies of imperialism and imperial aspects of globalization,” as well as “a necessary counterweight to the decontextualizing force of universal globalism” (2003, p. 136)

This “politics of imagining Asia” (Wang, 2011) has only become more contested recently with a surge in Anti-Asian sentiments during the Covid-19 pandemic and the intensification of a “new Cold War” centered around the US and China. Digital platforms and technologies are at the center of these new confrontations: from supply chain disruption and restructuring, inter-regional flows of capital, goods, technologies, and labor, new restrictions of foreign capital and businesses, to discursive battles over racism and xenophobia, and debates about different models of political governance and economic development. Indeed, Asia at the current conjuncture is fraught with tensions as the Post-Cold-War US-led global order is destabilized amid the contested rise of China and the growing interdependence of regional economies regardless of on-going US-China decoupling. Situated at the confluence of platform studies and Asian studies, this special issue intends to bring scholars working at the intersection of these two lines of scholarship together for productive dialogue. What could we gain by rethinking platform studies *in and with* Asia? How could our engagement with platforms help advance Asian studies at the new conjuncture? We invite contributors to ruminate on the following questions:

### **Questions to think with**

- How do we reconcile the tension between exploring transnational and regional linkages and delineating local (regional, national, etc) path dependency?
- How could we find a balance between close analysis of platform technological affordances/properties and thick description of locale/cultural/industry specificities and complexities?
- How do we historicize and contextualize externally generated theories and problematizations rather than mechanically applying them in the study of “Asian cases,” thereby reinforcing a biased distinction between theory and its empirical application.
- How could we de-provincialize platformization in Asia and/or provincialize existing theories of digital platforms produced based on Euro-American experiences to rethink platform studies in and with Asia without perpetuating existing binaries such as West vs. Asia?
- How could we go beyond American-centrism and Sinocentrism or Sinophobia to re-imagine a more equitable and collaborative regional/global order?

- In what ways does an engagement with digital platforms and digital tools contribute to methodological innovations in Asian studies? What are the epistemological implications of these new methods for our understanding of Asia?

### **Potential Topics**

We welcome contributions in the form of either a **full-length paper** (8,000 words) or a **short reflection essay** (3-4,000 words), to address one or more of the following topics in relation to platforms/infrastructures

- Histories and geopolitics
- Transborder flows of technologies, ideas, people, capital, and goods
- Local and indigenous knowledge as well as internal complexities, contradictions, heterogeneity and variegations
- Racial, ethnic, gender, class/caste, and rural-urban inequalities, and national and regional imbalances
- Decolonization and de-imperialization, legacies of colonialism, imperialism or neo-imperialism, both external and internal
- The contested role of the state in governing platform economies, technoscientific nationalism
- Tensions between development, equity, nationalism, and globalization
- The impact of China’s contested rise and US-China decoupling on the region.
- Exchanges and encounters between Asia and other Global South nations/regions (Africa, Latin America etc.)
- Subject making and institutional formation
- Comparative perspectives on digital technologies: continuities and ruptures from economic and social traditions

### **Publication Timeline**

- **June 1, 2023** Abstract due:
  1. 800 to 1000-word for the full paper. The abstract should specify the issues or research questions to be discussed, the methodological or critical framework used, the expected findings and key concept(s) the paper engages with, and five key references.
  2. 300 words for the commentary essay. It should outline a conceptual or methodological intervention that challenges existing scholarship on the topics
  3. All abstracts should be sent to [elainejyuan@gmail.com](mailto:elainejyuan@gmail.com) with the subject line “**Social Media + Society special issue**”
- **July 19, 2023** Notification of accepted abstracts
- **February 1, 2024.** Full manuscript Due
- **Dec 31, 2024** Final revisions due (after two rounds of reviews)