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Expert Insights

William J. Vogt

AI Agents in China

New Directions in Technology and Political Culture

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Abstract

China has become a world leader in AI development and innovation, and its state-based system, as discussed in this paper, has created new platforms that are highly competitive in the global AI market. The nature of this type of technology innovation runs counter to the better-understood Western path of tech development as defined by private sector dominance in investment and product development. This difference highlights the need for greater conversations about use and governance in digitally connected societies. Such conversations will become more urgent as Chinese AI innovations grow more powerful and may be adopted in countries around the world. This is particularly the case as China may be advancing towards creating a global standard for technology-mediated societal development in a growing push towards singularity.[1]

Recent introductions from Chinese companies like Butterfly Effect (BF)—especially its Manus agent—demonstrate Beijing's ability to pursue new advancements and shape narratives about AI use and governance. Such introductions present advanced and competent competition for Western-based AI products from core firms like OpenAI, Google, Meta, etc. These autonomous AI platforms ("agents") are designed to lead complex, automated tasks where a human can exist outside of the execution and decision-making loop. In this way, the idea of AI agents aligns well with the Chinese government's priorities to support and maintain a superior indigenous development ecosystem. This reality is evidenced by growing competition among similar AI products in the domestic Chinese market, including innovations from major tech companies like Deepseek and ByteDance.

That said, these developments also reflect worrying trends that pose serious ethical, political, and economic concerns. These concerns extend beyond moral considerations for humanity to include the continued dominance of centralized Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control. This is highly significant given the CCP's role as China's leading governmental authority and its influence as a motivator for continued international tech innovation. China's growth and influence internationally make these takeaways all the more important, for they represent the potential for a new, non-Western model of technology-mediated society to take root, supplanting traditional Western global influence.

Introduction

In much of the developed world—namely, technologically advanced Western countries, with the United States chief among them—innovation is often seen as a natural progression driven by the efficiencies and motivation of free and open markets. This perception partly stems from the overwhelming presence of American innovators and soft power mechanisms during the most recent revolution in information and communication technology (ICT). In the current iteration of technology-fueled socioeconomic change—the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution—Western narratives, actors, companies, and products have once again taken center stage.[2]

This time, however, we are witnessing a unique event in human history: the innovation conversation must now also account for the needs, cultures, and directions of non-Western societies (particularly China) as future technologies are promoted, developed, and introduced. Chinese AI has become every bit as influential and powerful as its Western counterpart. China holds significant leads in AI patent development and has become a well-resourced hub for talent cultivation and start-up incubation.[3] This is especially evident in recent developments such as Deepseek, which, as a powerful low-cost AI solution, represents a powerful showcase of China's approach to AI.[4]

This multicontinental conversation continues as AI enters a new stage, with increasing focus on creating and implementing autonomous agents ("AI agents") that can leverage AI capabilities at a higher level. These functional, fully autonomous assistants are built on top of better-known generative AI systems and hold powerful potential to improve task efficiency and output on multiple levels. In business, this is best understood through the orchestration of seemingly unrelated or complex tasks to achieve a specific outcome. Examples include coordinating planning sessions, meetings, or conferences—managing scheduling, invitations, and documentation—and synthesizing diverse inputs for executive decision-making in fields ranging from the corporate world to comprehensive healthcare and education benefits.[5] It remains to be seen whether these impacts will extend beyond the corporate sector, but given their effects on institutional decision-making, political and policymaking bodies may soon find similar benefits.

China is an important case study because it represents a non-Western approach to resolving technological and social problems through domestically forged, proprietary AI. These developments in China have global implications, potentially influencing financial and economic systems. Thus, we see a natural dovetailing of non-Western technological innovation with modern global policymaking—extending beyond economic growth strategies alone. Politicians may also be drawn to the ability to leverage AI knowledge bases on platforms utilized by AI agents to advance ideological agendas and manage nationwide public opinion concerns that could quickly escalate into national security issues.

For this reason, it is unsurprising that a regime like China's—known for strict, isolationist censorship to suppress mass collective action that Beijing views as dangerous elements of political instability from among its population of over one billion people[6]—would view AI agents as the next step in perfecting its vision of Chinese society.

1.

Manus: China's Deepseek Sequel

China recently experienced a Deepseek-esque breakthrough with the limited March 2025 introduction of a new AI agent, Manus.[7] This platform reflects several commonly observed lessons in AI infrastructure development, namely that employing software engineers to lead simple design approaches fosters innovation. This occurs alongside open-source frameworks designed for efficiency, which remain a major emphasis in the Chinese AI industry. Because AI agents are built to operate on top of AI models, selecting the right models becomes a critical aspect of creating a useful tool, with effectiveness depending on accuracy, adaptability, and domain specification.[8] In the case of Manus, the agent integrates foundations from both Western models (such as Anthropic's influential Claude, in addition to the reality that the modern tech industry is based on Western foundations) and Chinese models (such as Qwen from Alibaba Group) that can provide bespoke and more controllable solutions to sustaining Communist Party power and economic prosperity.[9]

This reliance on multiple sources underscores both the diversity and competitiveness of the global industry, paralleling the international funding sources that support Chinese tools like Manus.[10] For its part, Manus and its developer, Butterfly Effect, face stiff competition, even as Manus retains a reputation as a leading platform in this field.[11] To underscore the breadth of Chinese AI innovation, it is useful to note some of these competitors:

- **Coze:** A ByteDance product that draws on a proprietary knowledge base limited to ByteDance assets (including TikTok).[12]
- **Minimax:** An emerging AI leader with growing brand presence[13]
- **Zhipu**: A provider of a free AI agent, emblematic of the reduced cost barriers for contemporary advanced AI.[14]
- **Genspark**: Described by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as a platform that "links many small 'super agents'" for enhanced output results.[15]
- **Flowith**: An AI agent system that builds and connects systematized "branches" of search and thought/knowledge development, customizable to user needs.[16]
- **WeChat**: While not itself an AI agent, its "super app" model serves as inspiration for Manus and other competitors.[17]

Even within this crowded ecosystem of domestic AI development, Manus continues to stand out for its ability to translate massive amounts of computing power into more fully autonomous functions. Its "multi-agent architecture" leverages cloud-based operative capacity to create a platform that minimizes the need for human input—a notable achievement in AI development both in China and globally.[18] That said, Manus remains attractive worldwide partly because it does include limited human involvement. Rather than requiring direct intervention, the system incorporates user supervision through a transparent interface that displays the agent's real-time activities.[19]

Although reducing the human bandwidth required for complex tasks may seem promising, Manus has not yet achieved universal acclaim. Some human testers have criticized its performance, citing concerns about accuracy and the potential negative consequences of large-scale deployment, though the exact nature of the errors remains to be researched.[20]

2.

Government Priorities: Fostering Innovation

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has articulated a consistent set of policy directions for AI development that now extends to AI agent innovation. A central component of this policy is financial: funding for AI research and development (R&D) has come from substantial state-approved investment, from both local and national governments,[21] as well as companies operating as "private sector" entities that, due to their nature as Chinese business organizations, are closely tied to state interests abroad. This funding perpetuates the growth of research centers and technology innovation zones, ensuring that Chinese innovators have the resources to maintain globally competitive standards.

Policymakers play a particularly influential role by directing funds as a form of "guidance" that steers AI innovation along specific scopes and purposes.[22] This approach also extends to foreign funding opportunities: overseas partners may gain early access to advanced Chinese AI by collaborating with Chinese researchers, but must carefully avoid actions that could provoke damaging pushback from the CCP, as had been observed during previous eras of information technology development and foreign investment into the PRC when strict standards of censorship limited involvement.[23]

A critical goal for Chinese policymakers is to sustain research output to advance the AI field—though with less emphasis on harder-to-develop artificial general intelligence (AGI).[24] In practice, this strategy has led to China's dominance in AI patent filings (nearly 75 percent of all global applications) and related annual paper publications. These achievements reflect a broader goal: positioning China as the world's undisputed AI leader by 2030.[25] This ambition takes a society-wide approach, not only by introducing advanced AI tools to China's expansive domestic market but also by enacting laws and policies designed to leverage AI for the continued health of the CCP itself.

As a result, the CCP is undertaking several political-economy calculations to meet these objectives:

- **Censorship and Stability:** Addressing the dangers of information and misinformation that challenge CCP values or social stability. For example, deepfakes are strictly prohibited on the Chinese internet[26] and are enforceable by the Cyberspace Administration of China.[27]
- **Foreign Policy Leverage:** Biased AI hallucinations—incorrect outputs from frequently biased AI systems[28]—can be used to justify foreign policy directions. Within China's curated information environment, AI platforms may generate a reality "with Chinese characteristics."[29] In international contexts, this can reinforce antagonism toward perceived "undue" foreign influence in CCP affairs, potentially pushing policymakers toward destabilizing or aggressive diplomacy.[30]
- **Balancing authoritarianism and openness**: Navigating contradictions between strict control[31] and more laissez-faire approaches, such as the following:[32]
  - ***Emphasizing open-source code in AI development.*** The most advanced Chinese platforms cannot be fully deployed domestically since their expansive knowledge bases would conflict with China's censorship regime. For example, an AI system with access to wide-ranging information through retrieval augmented generation (RAG) could process and respond comprehensively to prompts. Yet for China—and other states that actively censor media—such systems pose unacceptable risks even though restrictions may increase the potential for misleading or damaging hallucinations.
  - *Pursuing cutting-edge AI technologies while simultaneously promoting global AI governance aligned with the CCP's vision*, despite the pressures and vulnerabilities that international engagement creates for Party rule.

3.

Continuing Concerns

The Chinese tech regime has produced impressive and advanced tools and platforms, driving AI to the next level, particularly because it is actively building non-Western models for AI development and governance that correspond with a wide range of "Global South" cultures and non-democratic states. AI innovations are motivating new thinking about the sociotechnical impact of AI and the autonomous agents that can now power it without direct human touch. These questions—not only about human-computer interaction but also the state-based presence of the Chinese government in technological innovation—are inherently political and are difficult to articulate in traditionally "neutral" terms. Thus, the breakthroughs that platforms like Manus represent pose potentially threatening impacts to the world today.

As such, China's case here is significant given that its ecosystem operates outside the traditional tech culture norms of the West and therefore unsurprisingly shows fewer discussions of ethical and other human-centered concerns that exist more widely in developed nations and Silicon Valley.

The introduction of new technologies like the Manus AI agent raises four primary questions as humanity continues to process the introduction, use, and effectiveness of AI agents. This is particularly significant as the Chinese state-based investment mechanisms for technology development demonstrate a firm commitment to unbridled R&D. Answering these questions will be a key test of East-West understanding about technology/AI development and its proper application in a well-functioning global society.

First, ***how much emotion is too much when it comes to connecting with AI?*** In comparisons between Chinese and Western AI agent users, Chinese users often display more personal affection and relationship toward their AI platforms while Americans tend to view AI as a business tool.[33] The implications here are vast, given that personal connection to AI could provide emotional bias that, in extreme cases, might cloud individual and policy decision-making. For innovations like Manus, the question of emotion input from domestic users may also highlight national pride in a homegrown innovation crafted in China, by China, and for the Chinese market (at least at first). This nationalism importantly aligns with the hawkish outputs Chinese AI is known to generate, thereby fostering social buy-in on key issues in CCP policy and foreign affairs.

Second, ***what happens when the AI agent is truly wrong about something?*** When AI produces a hallucination, the consequences can be serious, but the outputs are typically tied to individual tasks. If an AI agent commits a similar error, the output potential is magnified, given that the agent manages a series of complex, overlapping tasks. When money, power, or law is involved, such errors could have deep economic and dystopian results.[34] Naturally, this misinformation may have perceived benefits for the CCP as it looks to maintain near-total control over the country and society. Perhaps more troubling is the precedent: intentionally biased AI agents could serve as a model for other political actors seeking to consolidate power, thereby deepening digitally mediated authoritarianism in the twenty-first century.

Third, ***will governments like the CCP continue to prioritize free-flowing experimentation in technical R&D over their natural inclinations toward total control?*** From many perspectives within neoliberal economic structures that have driven the latest waves of cyber innovations (including AI), taking a purely experimental approach with strong investor funding on prospective inventions seems an appropriate path forward for advancing humanity. In the case of AI, however, the rapid and poorly understood consequences of computing output and decision-making highlight the need for smart regulation. Manus could play a key role here in China, including as a national champion for AI products that justifies current investment patterns. The creation of so many other AI agents within the confines of the Chinese market further encourages research investment on a broad scale. These platforms constitute tangible evidence of world-leading innovation by creating a suite of competitive products all under the control of one regime not dependent on the West (a perceived adversary).

Finally, ***how does China address its overall negative global reputation and low levels of trust from outsiders in its tech brands?*** Even though the scope of AI innovation in China has been based on a light regulatory touch, the culture of minimal data privacy (and localization practices) remains a concern for many foreigners, from governments to individuals, who are warned to be mindful of submitting personally sensitive data. This concern is especially relevant in the age of AI, where users are consistently encouraged and enticed to input specific data into systems that can deliver impressive answers and results while simultaneously using those inputs to train themselves for more refined responses. This data is inevitably stored within the platform company's assets—a personal security concern for private companies and a potential national security concern when systems operate from the Chinese tech ecosystem, an entity associated with a country in an open confrontation with Western interests.[35]

Author:

William J. Vogt

William J. Vogt is a Senior Executive Fellow at The Digital Economist, where he focuses on the politics and societies of the Portuguese-speaking countries. He is the author of the article “China and Lusophonia: A Compatible Alliance Network” and has previous professional experience supporting immigration/ refugee service programs and the US Department of Homeland Security.

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CONTACT: INFO@THEDIGITALECONOMIST.COM