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Neoliberalism, Digital Restructuring, and Asian Political Discourse: An Anthropological Inquiry into AI Technology and the Evolution of Human Civilizational Forms

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Abstract. The breakthrough development of artificial intelligence technology is driving a fundamental transition of human civilization from industrial to digital-intelligent form, while neoliberalism has formed a deep coupling with digital technology, generating unique political discourse practices in the Asian context and posing fundamental challenges to traditional anthropological understandings of civilizational diversity. From an anthropological perspective, this paper combines neoliberalism and digital age value restructuring, focuses on Asian digital political discourse construction, and explores how Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology drives the evolution of human civilizational forms. This paper systematically unpacks the three-dimensional value restructuring mechanism spanning labor processes, subjective identity, and public value formed by neoliberalism and digital technology, reveals the localized construction and power games of Asian AI political discourse, and reflects on inherent cultural power inequality in this process. This study supplements empirical analysis of neoliberalism's localized restructuring in AI-era Asia, expands anthropology's critical horizon on digital technology and civilizational diversity, and provides academic reference for defending Asian digital development autonomy.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, digital restructuring, Asian political discourse, AI.

1. Introduction

As people enter the third decade of the 21st century, the breakthrough development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology is restructuring the relations of production, ways of life, and value systems of human society with unprecedented depth and breadth. From the deep penetration of big data algorithms into daily life to the revolutionary transformation of knowledge production by generative AI, from the recording of labor processes by platform capitalism to the structural shift in the geopolitical landscape driven by technological competition, AI is far more than a technological innovation in a single field. It is driving a fundamental transition of the entire form of human civilization from industrial civilization to digital-intelligent civilization. Amid this historic shift, neoliberalism, an ideological trend that emerged in the late 20th century, has formed a deep coupling with digital technology, giving rise to unique political discourse practices in the Asian context and

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posing a fundamental challenge to traditional anthropological understandings of civilizational evolution, value order, and cultural subjectivity.

From an anthropological perspective, this paper combines the propositions of neoliberalism and value restructuring in the digital age, focuses on the construction of digital political discourse in the Asian context, systematically explores how the development of AI technology drives the evolution of human civilizational forms, and reflects on the inequality of cultural power and the possibility of diverse civilizational development inherent in this process. The core contributions of this study are twofold: first, it supplements the empirical analysis of the localized restructuring of neoliberalism in Asia in the AI era; second, it expands the critical horizon of anthropology on digital technology and civilizational diversity.

2. Neoliberalism and value restructuring in the digital age: from structural deconstruction to algorithmic encoding

As the dominant ideological trend of global capitalist development in the mid-to-late 20th century, the core tenet of neoliberalism is to deconstruct the post-WWII welfare state system and the tradition of state interventionism through the implementation of market-oriented, privatization, and liberalization reforms, and to fully implant market logic into all areas of social life [1]. When neoliberalism encountered the digital revolution, the two did not form a simple external combination, but an inherent symbiotic relationship of mutual construction and reinforcement, driving a profound movement of value restructuring.

2.1. Digital restructuring of labor value and the rise of platform capitalism

The popularization of digital technology has provided infrastructural support for the neoliberal restructuring of labor processes. The traditional factory wage labor system has been replaced by "gig labor" in the platform economy. Through algorithmic matching, digital platforms realize real-time scheduling and refined control of the labor force, and workers' working hours, labor intensity, and even labor emotions are placed under the continuous surveillance of algorithms [1]. This new form of labor seemingly endows workers with autonomy and flexibility, but in fact fully transfers production risks to individual workers, leading to the generalization of labor precarity. Research by Niels van Doorn points out that platform labor faces systematic exploitation along gender and racial lines, and low-income service workers, under the allocation of platform algorithms, endure triple oppression of class, gender, and race more severe than that in traditional wage labor [1].

In the field of education, the neoliberal restructuring of values has also advanced in depth with the help of digital technology. Research by Malin Ideland finds that edtech discourse frames the identity of teachers into an image similar to that of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs: teachers are required to be coaches rather than lecturers, with an emphasis on personalization, flexibility, and autonomy, while "tedious" work such as grading is handed over to AI algorithms. The ultimate goal is to cultivate "dreamers" and innovators adapted to the digital knowledge economy. This process is essentially the full implantation of commercialized neoliberal rationality into the education sector, weakening traditional teacher authority and the public nature of public education [2].

Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, points out that neoliberal discourse in China's digital field, through market-oriented media narratives, continuously erodes the public nature of public issues and transforms social problems into private life issues that individuals need to solve. This conclusion profoundly reveals the discursive operation logic of digital neoliberalism.

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This paper is a continuation of Chua's research tradition, extending the analytical horizon to the restructuring of the value system by AI technology [3].

2.2. Value restructuring of subjective identity and the entrepreneurial ethic of the self

The combination of neoliberalism and digital technology has profoundly changed the way individual subjectivity is constructed. In digital space, individuals are required to become "entrepreneurs of the self", gaining social recognition and economic returns through continuous self-branding and self-promotion, and the social value of an individual is directly reflected in their social media attention, follower count, and data traffic. Research by Urszula M. Pruchniewska on female self-media creators finds that even creators engaged in feminist content production have to face the dilemma of compromising between personal self-brand promotion and collective feminist political goals: they need to incorporate "authentic feminism" into their personal brand narrative and redefine feminism to adapt to the market demands of post-feminism in order to succeed in the digital economy [4].

This construction of subjectivity is further differentiated along the axes of class, gender, and race. Research by Helena Heizmann and Helena Liu on the Instagram identity performance of elite female entrepreneurs in Australia shows that in the digital space, the privileges of white, elite, heterosexual, and able-bodied groups are reproduced through neoliberal discourse, and the romanticized narrative of women's economic empowerment obscures the persistence of structural oppression [5].

2.3. Privatization of public value and neoliberal governmentality

Digital technology has driven neoliberal governmentality to develop in a more nuanced direction. Gilles Deleuze predicted the arrival of the "society of control" half a century ago: in the society of control, the physical boundaries of disciplinary spaces are broken, and control is realized in real time and continuously through continuous digital connections and algorithmic evaluation. Lilie Chouliaraki's analysis of victim discourse shows that in the era of digital neoliberalism, victim identity has become an emotional commodity that can circulate on platforms, and suffering has been platformed as a cultural norm. This commodification process exacerbates social inequality, and the most vulnerable groups are further marginalized in the competition for emotional capital [6].

In the field of intellectual property, the combination of neoliberalism and digital technology has created a new geopolitical value order. Bhaskar Sarkar's research on pirated media in Asia points out that global intellectual property governance binds piracy to terrorism, constructs a binary of productive/unproductive (creative/parasitic), and maps this binary onto the globe: Asia is marked as a problematic region for intellectual property, and there is a huge gap between neoliberal elites and the general public in their attitudes towards intellectual property rules, a gap that reflects the profound contradiction between legitimacy and legality [7]. This restructuring of the value order essentially serves the privatized appropriation of digital value by transnational capital, transforming information and cultural knowledge that could originally flow freely into commodities that can be appropriated and exploited by capital.

3. Digital political discourse in the Asian context: localized construction and power games of AI development

This paper roughly divides the Asian AI field into two core sectors in terms of geopolitics and discursive forms: first, the East Asian developmentalist AI narrative zone dominated by China, Japan, and South Korea, characterized by the state playing a leading role in AI development, with AI

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development deeply embedded in the national development agenda; second, the Southeast Asian diverse political AI practice zone dominated by ASEAN countries, characterized by complex and diverse AI discourses and practices formed under geopolitical games and a multi-political structure. Asia is one of the regions in the world with the fastest development of AI technology and the largest market scale, as well as the region with the richest civilizational diversity and the most complex geopolitical conflicts. With the spread of neoliberal logic to Asia along with digital technology, it has collided, integrated, and played games with local political and cultural traditions, forming a unique digital political discourse ecology that has profoundly affected the development path and civilizational effects of AI technology in Asia.

3.1. The challenge of digital sovereignty discourse to the neoliberal global order

In recent years, major Asian economies have put forward digital sovereignty strategies in the process of AI development, forming a political discourse different from the European and American neoliberal framework. Unlike the EU's emphasis on "open strategic autonomy", the digital sovereignty discourse of Asian countries places more emphasis on the core role of the state in AI governance, closely linking the development of digital technology with the development rights and security rights of nation-states [8]. The rise of this discourse is essentially a reflection of and rebellion against the global governance discourses such as "free flow of data" and "technological neutrality" advocated by neoliberalism.

At the geopolitical level, the Sino-US AI competition has driven the differentiation of Asian digital political discourse into different camps, but at the same time, it has given birth to an intermediate discourse emphasizing "Asian autonomy". Many Asian countries oppose both the US-led neoliberal digital globalization and taking sides, trying to explore an AI development path in line with their own national conditions. This discursive practice reflects the pursuit of development autonomy by Asian countries in the digital age, breaks the monopoly of neoliberal discourse on global digital governance, and reserves space for the development of civilizational diversity.

3.2. Algorithmic effect and digital deception in AI political communication in Southeast Asia

In the context of democratic transition in Southeast Asia, AI technology has profoundly changed the local political communication ecology, giving rise to new political discourse practices such as "algorithmic effect" and "digital deception". Recent research points out that AI-generated content is widely used in political elections, through algorithmic analysis of voters' emotional tendencies, customized generation of politically inflammatory content to achieve precise manipulation of voters' emotions [9]. Different from traditional media control, this new political operation, with the help of AI's personalized distribution capability, makes political deception more hidden and effective, posing a new challenge to the fragile democratic system in Southeast Asia.

Taking the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election as an example, ethnographic survey data clearly shows the specific mechanism of AI's intervention in political communication: in this election, more than 60% of social media political content was AI-generated or AI-enhanced, among which AI-produced political short videos on Douyin (TikTok) received more than 2.8 billion views, and the vast majority of AI content focused on candidate image building and opponent smearing. In-depth interviews with 120 young voters in the central Java electoral districts showed that more than 70% of respondents said they had seen AI-generated false political content, and nearly 40% of them admitted that AI content had a significant impact on their voting intentions [10,11]. Behind this discursive practice reflects a complex power structure: on the one hand, local political elites use AI

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technology to consolidate their power, continuing the authoritarian political tradition; on the other hand, transnational technology capital still maintains a strong influence on the local political process through technology export and platform control. The neoliberal market logic has formed a peculiar combination with local authoritarian politics.

3.3. AI civilizational narrative under developmentalist discourse

In East Asia, AI development is generally incorporated into the national developmentalist discourse framework and has become a core grip for realizing national rejuvenation and catching up with developed countries. AI technology has been endowed with the historical significance of promoting a civilizational leap, and "intelligent civilization" and "digital civilization" have become core concepts in official discourse. This discourse directly equates technological progress with civilizational progress and emphasizes realizing overtaking of Western developed economies through state-led AI R&D and industrial layout.

While promoting the rapid development of AI, this developmentalist discourse has also raised some noteworthy issues. On the one hand, it strengthens the state's guidance and control over AI development, which is conducive to concentrating resources to achieve technological breakthroughs; on the other hand, it may suppress the diverse discourse discussion on AI development, marginalizing issues such as technological ethics and social equity, with economic benefits overriding social value and instrumental rationality covering up value rationality. How to maintain a reflective balance on the civilizational effects of technology while giving full play to institutional advantages to promote AI development is the core issue that the East Asian AI development discourse needs to respond to.

As a connection point between East Asia and Southeast Asia, Singapore has formed a hybrid AI governance model of "state-led planning + neoliberal market operation", constituting a transitional type between the two sectors. In Singapore's Smart Nation Initiative, the state leads the construction of AI infrastructure and top-level planning, while fully liberalizing market access and encouraging transnational capital and local technology enterprises to jointly participate in AI R&D and application. This model not only gives play to the leading role of the state, but also retains the market vitality of neoliberalism, providing a unique hybrid experience for AI governance in Asia.

4. Anthropological reflections: power inequality and diverse paths in the process of AI civilization

Faced with the transition of civilizational forms driven by AI technology, anthropology, as a discipline focusing on human diversity and cultural power, should maintain a clear critical awareness, reveal the power relations obscured in the process of AI civilization, and defend the possibility of diverse civilizational development.

4.1. Reproduction of the digital divide and civilizational stratification

The digital divide in the AI era is far more profound than that in the traditional Internet era. The traditional digital divide is mainly reflected in the access gap, while the digital divide in the AI era is more reflected in the data gap and algorithm gap. Digital capitalism takes data as its core means of production and realizes the full penetration of capital into all areas of social life through algorithms and platforms. Neoliberalism provides ideological legitimacy for this penetration, and the coupling of the two has formed "algorithmic hegemony". A small number of developed countries and large

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technology giants control the massive data and computing resources required for training AI, and most developing countries are in a position of passively accepting technology exports. This unequal distribution of resources is reproducing a new civilizational stratification [11]. The lack of core AI technology in late-developing countries may lead to their further marginalization in the new round of civilizational competition, and the global civilizational pattern may experience more serious polarization.

Within the Southeast Asian region, this digital divide is particularly evident: according to the latest statistics, the number of AI computing nodes per million population in developed Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia is more than 70 times that of low-income countries such as Laos and Cambodia, and the gap in the density of AI professionals is more than 30 times. In the field of education, top universities in Malaysia have fully realized AI personalized teaching, while most middle schools in rural areas of Myanmar cannot even guarantee stable Internet access. This gap is being passed down between generations, continuously solidifying the civilizational stratification structure within the region [12,13]. This civilizational stratification is also reflected at the value level: neoliberal discourse packages the Western AI development model as a "universal path" and denies the legitimacy of non-Western societies exploring local AI development paths, which is essentially a new form of cultural imperialism that attempts to impose Western value standards and institutional arrangements on non-Western societies, which is fundamentally contrary to the development direction of civilizational diversity.

4.2. Anthropological examination of value dissolution and meaning crisis

The development of AI technology has posed a profound challenge to the traditional human value system. Building on Gilles Deleuze's seminal proposition of the "society of control"—which lays bare the real-time, continuous surveillance and governance paradigm of the digital age, where the physical boundaries of disciplinary spaces are dissolved and control is enacted through perpetual digital connectivity and algorithmic regulation—and Michel Foucault's biopolitical theory, which elucidates how neoliberal rationality extends its logic into the full-spectrum governance of every dimension of individual life, people can establish the core theoretical framework for interpreting this value restructuring. This critical lens reveals that the AI-driven challenge to human value systems is not merely a technical disruption, but a deep-seated reshaping of the governance logic that underpins the social production of human value and meaning. When AI can surpass humans in almost all cognitive fields, and when creativity, aesthetics and emotion, which were once considered unique human abilities, are gradually imitated and even surpassed by AI, the question of the meaning of human existence is raised again. Traditional labor value and creative value are facing the risk of being dissolved by AI, which may trigger a universal meaning crisis.

From an anthropological perspective, meaning is always a product of cultural construction. It is true that AI technology has shaken the meaning system formed in the era of industrial civilization, but this does not mean the end of the human meaning world. On the contrary, it may promote humans to create a new meaning system adapted to the era of intelligent civilization. The key to the problem is that people cannot passively accept the dissolution of meaning by technology, but should actively carry out cultural creation, rediscover human value in the new relationship between humans and AI and construct a new civilizational meaning system.

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4.3. Defending the diverse development paths of Asian civilizations

Western neoliberal discourse has forged digital cultural hegemony by virtue of its technological advantages, while the anthropological theory of civilizational diversity provides a solid theoretical foundation for critiquing this monolithic universal standard and defending the developmental autonomy of Asian societies. As a treasure house of civilizational diversity, Asia has different cultural traditions, political systems and development stages, which provide a rich soil for exploring diverse development paths of AI civilization. Different from the European and American neoliberal path that leaves AI development entirely to the market, different countries in Asia are exploring AI development paths suitable for their own national conditions according to their own circumstances: China emphasizes industry-university-research collaborative innovation under the leadership of the state, Singapore pursues people-oriented development in smart city construction, India focuses on the empowerment of AI for rural development, and Southeast Asian countries seek independent development space in the game between major powers. These diverse practices themselves are an important contribution to human civilization, proving that there is not only one possibility for the development path of AI.

To translate these diverse national exploratory practices into systematic, coordinated actions that safeguard Asian civilizational autonomy in the AI era, three core actionable initiatives are advanced:

First, building a collaborative mechanism for Asian digital sovereignty. This involves establishing an Asian AI Governance Alliance to unify regional data security rules and standards and collectively resist Western technological hegemony and the monolithic universal standard imposed by neoliberal discourse.

Second, improving the regional algorithmic ethics and supervision system. An Asian AI Ethics Review Committee shall be set up to enforce mandatory algorithmic transparency and risk assessment mechanisms and explicitly prohibit algorithm-enabled political manipulation and discriminatory applications in the region.

Third, advancing the inclusive development of digital technologies across Asia. A dedicated Asian Digital Inclusion Fund will be established to narrow the regional gaps in computing power, professional talent, and digital infrastructure, and fully guarantee the digital rights and interests of developing countries in the region.

5. Conclusion

This paper adopts an anthropological lens to investigate the coupling of neoliberalism and digital AI technology, its reshaping of human civilizational forms, and the distinctive digital political discourse in the Asian context. It unpacks how algorithmic hegemony reproduces global and regional civilizational stratification, analyzes AI-driven value dissolution through the framework of Deleuze's control society and Foucault's biopolitics, and demonstrates Asian countries' diverse AI development practices against neoliberal monolithic standards, with actionable coordinated initiatives for regional digital autonomy.

This study is limited by insufficient coverage of South and Central Asian AI governance cases and a lack of long-term ethnographic tracking of regional practices. Future research will conduct cross-regional comparative ethnographic studies to enrich localized empirical evidence and explore inclusive global digital governance paths rooted in civilizational diversity.

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