

# Internet Decolonisation Strategies: A Study on China's Approach

Zhiheng Yang [2773738]

<sup>a</sup>Vrije University Amsterdam

<sup>b</sup>University of Amsterdam

---

## Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of China's strategic response to information colonization, underscoring its implications on the global digital economy. By promoting domestic software development and imposing stringent data policies, China has asserted its digital sovereignty, establishing a unique model of decolonisation in the information space. While this approach has accelerated the growth of domestic software giants and fortified national security, concerns over restricted competition, stifling innovation, and privacy infringement have been raised. The paper further explores the case of Google's exit from China, the rise of domestic software, and the subsequent influence on public opinion. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for a delicate balance between national security, technological development, and a free digital world. As countries navigate the digital era, this discourse will continue to shape the future of the global digital landscape.

*Keywords:* Information Colonization, Digital Sovereignty, Data Policies, Global Digital Economy, Chinese Tech Industry

---

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of information colonization

Information colonization refers to the control and influence a foreign entity exerts over another nation's information space, often to their advantage, much akin to the physical colonization of yesteryears. This phenomenon is increasingly being recognized as a threat to national sovereignty and security in our highly digitized world(1). The current status of information colonization is marked by a complex web of power dynamics, with nations attempting to maintain or gain control over their digital spaces. Countries like China, in particular, have made lots of efforts to staking their claim on their digital territories, which influence the global digital ecosystem.

### 1.2 overview of the paper's content and structure

The paper begins by outlining the concept of information colonization and the global context surrounding this phenomenon. It then delves into China's countermeasures against information colonization, dissecting the state's strategic policies, data management approach, and the consequences of these actions. We discuss a seminal event - Google's exit from China, analyzing the undercurrents leading to this decision and its direct aftermath on China's tech ecosystem. This is followed by a comprehensive study of China's flourishing domestic software scene after the exit of worldwide high-tech companies, elucidating governmental strategies, the current state of the sector, and evolution. The penultimate section conducts an in-depth exploration of the pros and cons of China's approach to information colonization, addressing its impact on the domestic and global tech scene. The paper concludes by recapping key insights and reflecting on the implications for the future of the global digital landscape.

## 2. China's Response to Information Colonization

### 2.1 Strategy for decolonisation

Recognizing the potential threats and challenges of information colonization, China has developed and implemented a range of strategic policies aimed at asserting its digital sovereignty. Central to these strategies is the fostering of domestic technology companies, a move that seeks to limit the influence and penetration of foreign tech giants in China's digital landscape.

The Chinese government has consistently promoted and protected domestic firms through initiatives like financial support, subsidies, and preferential policies. This protectionist approach, combined with stringent regulatory measures on foreign tech companies, has provided domestic firms with a conducive environment to grow and innovate.

Moreover, China has also made substantial investments to control and manage the flow of information within its digital space. This is evident in its implementation of the Great Firewall, a technology-infused policy measure that controls the inflow and outflow of digital information.

### 2.2 Underlying Data Management Issues and Implications

The data policy adopted by China is rooted in its goal of maintaining national security and digital sovereignty. The policy places a high emphasis on data localization, requiring companies to store data within China's borders. This allows the government to maintain control over data, a critical asset in the digital economy.

However, these data policies also carry significant implications. On one hand, they provide a protective shield against potential foreign data exploitation and protect the privacy of

Chinese citizens. On the other hand, they pose challenges to foreign companies operating or planning to operate in China, often making it difficult for them to navigate the Chinese digital landscape.

Furthermore, the policies have indirectly fostered the development and growth of domestic internet companies, creating a thriving digital ecosystem largely independent of foreign influence. However, this has also sparked discussions on issues of digital isolation and the risks of technology decoupling.

China’s response to information colonization presents a complex interplay of national security interests, economic considerations, and the desire for technological self-reliance.

### 3. The Case of Google’s Exit

Google Search’s exit from mainland China in 2010 stands as a significant event in the history of the global digital economy(7). Citing concerns over cyber-attacks and challenges related to local content regulations, Google made the decision to halt operations of its search engine in China. This decision marked an unprecedented moment where a global tech titan retreated from one of the world’s most extensive and fastest-growing internet markets. Figure 1 shows the approximate chronological development of Google and Baidu.

#### 3.1 Analysis of the Underlying Data Management Issues and Implications

Google’s exit from China was driven largely by issues surrounding data policies and internet regulation(6). In its operations, Google faced increasing pressure from Chinese authorities regarding compliance with local data laws and regulations, specifically those around censorship. China’s strict data sovereignty policy, which mandates data to be stored within specific location requirements, posed additional challenges. These policies, while safeguarding national security and user privacy, present a complex environment for foreign tech companies who often grapple with ethical and operational dilemmas.

Moreover, Google’s withdrawal underscored the implications of China’s information control strategy on global firms. It sent a message to other foreign tech companies about the importance of compliance with local regulations.

#### 3.2 The Direct Impact

The departure of Google from the Chinese market created a vacuum that was quickly filled by domestic internet companies. This turn of events significantly benefited Baidu, China’s home-grown search engine, propelling it to a dominant position in the Chinese search engine market.

Google’s exit served as a strong catalyst for the Chinese government’s push for technological self-reliance. With foreign competition diminished, domestic tech companies saw a surge in growth, bolstered by government support and protectionist policies. This also spurred innovation and competition among Chinese tech companies as they raced to capture the market space left by Google.

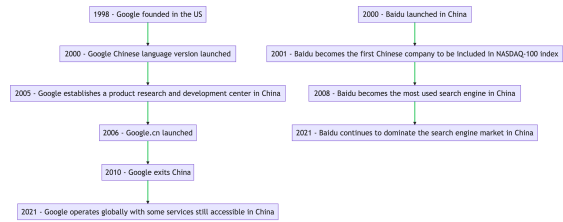


Figure 1: Google and Baidu’s Roughly Development

## 4. The Rise of Domestic Software in China

After this, China’s home-grown software began to rise, and there were domestic alternatives to almost all the world’s popular software, such as Baidu instead of Google, Didi instead of Uber and Weibo instead of Twitter(2). It’s a phenomenon largely triggered by the withdrawal of foreign tech giants like Google, creating opportunities for Chinese companies to innovate, adapt, and dominate the local digital landscape.

### 4.1 Explanation of Strategies Towards Foreign Software

The Chinese government’s stance towards foreign software has been marked by a focus on regulation and control. This has been implemented through a variety of policies, including censorship, data localization requirements, and stringent cybersecurity laws. The government’s primary goal is to maintain national security and digital sovereignty, ensuring control over data flows and the digital infrastructure(5).

At the same time, China’s policies(3) also aim to create a favorable environment for domestic companies, reducing the market share of foreign software and fostering an independent and resilient digital ecosystem.

### 4.2 Current State of Domestic Software Development

As a result of these policies, the domestic software industry in China has seen exponential growth and development over the past decade. Chinese companies like Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba, and ByteDance, have emerged as major players not only on the domestic stage but also in the global market(4).

These companies have successfully filled the gaps left by departing foreign software companies, developing products and services tailored to the unique demands of Chinese users. Moreover, they made noticeable improvements in various cutting-edge technology sectors such as artificial intelligence, fintech, e-commerce, and social media.

### 4.3 Evaluation of Public Opinion on the Growth of Domestic Software

Public opinion towards the growth of domestic software in China has been largely positive. The success of Chinese software companies has sparked a sense of national pride and is seen as evidence of China’s growing technological prowess. The ability of these companies to provide products and services tailored to the needs and preferences of Chinese consumers has also contributed to their popularity.

However, there are also concerns around issues such as privacy, censorship, and the lack of competition due to the dominant position of a few large companies. The Chinese government's recent regulatory crackdown on tech giants demonstrates a growing awareness of these issues and an effort to address them.

## 5. Pros and Cons of China's Approach to Information Colonization

### 5.1 In-depth Analysis of the Benefits and Drawbacks of China's Approach

China's approach to countering information colonization has distinct advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it has bolstered the development of domestic software, promoted technological innovation, and protected national security and digital sovereignty. By implementing stringent data policies and regulations, China has fostered an environment conducive to the growth of domestic software companies, thereby reducing its reliance on foreign technology.

The success of domestic firms like Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance has fueled economic growth, job creation, and technological advancement within China. Moreover, by maintaining control over its digital space, China has been able to protect its citizens' data from potential foreign exploitation and maintain a level of control over the flow of information within its borders.

On the flip side, this approach has its drawbacks. China's strict data policies can be perceived as creating a restrictive environment for foreign tech companies, potentially discouraging foreign investment in the tech sector. The stringent regulations might also impede the free flow of information, raising concerns over censorship and lack of access to diverse sources of information.

Furthermore, the dominant position of a few large domestic tech companies in the market could hamper competition, stifle innovation, and lead to monopolistic practices. There are also concerns around data privacy and protection, as the authorities have broad access to data collected by domestic companies and control the sources of information to the public.

### 5.2 Discussion on the Implications for Global Technology and Internet Companies

China's approach to information colonization has significant implications for global technology and internet companies. Firstly, it serves as a stark reminder that to operate in different jurisdictions, companies must be prepared to navigate and comply with local laws and regulations.

Secondly, the success of domestic software companies in China might inspire other nations to adopt similar strategies to promote their own digital sectors, thereby reshaping global competition dynamics. This could potentially lead to a more fragmented global digital landscape, characterized by distinct digital ecosystems operating under different regulations.

Lastly, China's approach raises important questions about the future of the global digital economy. As countries strive to assert their digital sovereignty, how will global tech companies adapt? How will the balance between protecting national security and promoting an open, interconnected digital world be achieved?

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, China's strategic response to information colonization has reshaped its digital landscape and created a unique model for digital sovereignty. By asserting control over its information space and promoting domestic software development, China has managed to decolonise its digital sphere, achieving a level of independence and resilience in the global digital economy.

On the one hand, these strategies have spurred the growth of domestic software giants, fueled technological innovation, and enhanced China's control over its own data, thereby fortifying national security. On the other hand, these actions raise concerns about restricted competition, potential stifling of innovation, and risk of speech control. Moreover, the regulatory environment may deter foreign investment, adding another layer of complexity to the global technology landscape.

While this unique model presents a pathway towards digital sovereignty, it also carries significant implications for the global digital economy. The rise of China's domestic software industry has offered a new blueprint for other countries to foster their own digital industries, potentially leading to a more fragmented global digital ecosystem.

Finally, as we continue to navigate the digital era, it becomes increasingly apparent that nations must strike a delicate balance. This balance lies between preserving national security and promoting domestic technological development, while also ensuring a free, interconnected, and innovative digital world. The discourse surrounding digital sovereignty and information colonization will undoubtedly continue to evolve, serving as a testament to our ongoing journey in defining the future of the global digital landscape.

## References

- [1] Syed Mustafa Ali. Prolegomenon to the decolonization of internet governance. 2018.
- [2] Christian Fuchs. Baidu, weibo and renren: The global political economy of social media in china. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 26(1):14–41, 2016.
- [3] James Griffiths. *The great firewall of China: How to build and control an alternative version of the internet*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- [4] Lizhi Liu. The rise of data politics: digital china and the world. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 56:45–67, 2021.
- [5] Hong Shen. Across the great (fire) wall: China and the global internet. 2017.
- [6] Charles E Stevens, En Xie, and Mike W Peng. Toward a legitimacy-based view of political risk: The case of google and yahoo in china. *Strategic management journal*, 37(5):945–963, 2016.
- [7] Clive Thompson et al. Google's china problem. *The Power of Information*, 2006.