Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities Research
Print ISSN: 2959-992X
Online ISSN: 2959-9938
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61784/tsshr3271

TECHNOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND VALUE BALANCE: DUAL PATHWAYS IN CHINA'S TECHNOLOGY GOVERNANCE POLICIES FOR THE AI ERA

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Abstract: The deep embedding of artificial intelligence (AI) technology is reshaping global governance. The tension between "technological empowerment" and "value balance" has become a common governance challenge for countries worldwide. Based on a dual-pathway framework of "technology-driven modernization of state governance" and "technology-embedded multi-actor social co-governance," this paper systematically analyzes the internal logic and operational mechanisms of technology governance in China in the AI era. The study finds that China's technology governance is not a single efficiency-oriented application of technology; rather, through the coordinated operation of dual pathways, it comprehensively achieves four major governance functions: efficiency improvement, equity promotion, security assurance, and institutional reconstruction. In terms of model characteristics, China has developed a distinctive paradigm centered on "enabling governance"-one that takes state capacity as its foundation, institutional flexibility as its safeguard, and plural public values as its goals. This paradigm transcends the single efficiency-oriented governance logic of the West and offers a non-Western pathway with both theoretical inspiration and practical reference for global digital governance. This paper argues that the core of "enabling governance" lies in resolving the tension between technological empowerment and value balance through institutional design, and that the transferability of its experience depends on the conditions of fit in specific institutional contexts.
Keywords: Technology governance; Artificial intelligence; Enabling governance; Global digital governance

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of AI technology is profoundly reshaping the forms and logic of public governance. From precision scheduling in smart cities to intelligent responsiveness in grassroots governance, algorithmic decision-making and data-driven approaches have become critical technological underpinnings for governments seeking to improve administrative effectiveness and optimize public services. However, the embedding of technology in governance is not merely a unidimensional efficiency gain; it also generates profound governance dilemmas: algorithmic black boxes erode decision-making transparency, data sharing raises privacy and security concerns, and gaps in digital infrastructure and literacy exacerbate social inequality. Together, these risks point to a fundamental question: in the AI era, how can technology governance achieve the unity of "empowerment" and "balance" [1].

This question has attracted considerable attention from the global public administration scholarly community. Existing scholarship has largely developed along two lines: first, from a technological perspective, it explores technical solutions such as algorithm optimization and data governance, emphasizing instrumental efficiency gains; second, from a normative perspective, it focuses on value issues such as algorithmic fairness and privacy protection, emphasizing institutional constraint design. However, most studies treat "technological empowerment" and "value balance" as competing dimensions requiring trade-offs, and few have systematically examined the institutional conditions and operational mechanisms for their synergistic realization. This theoretical gap means that when addressing AI governance dilemmas, countries often fall into a binary choice between "efficiency first" and "security paramount" [2].

In recent years, China has accumulated substantial practical experience in the field of AI technology governance. From "one-stop online government services" reshaping government service processes, to "regulatory sandboxes" balancing innovation incentives and risk prevention, from digital villages bridging the urban-rural divide to the algorithm filing system regulating technology applications, China has been exploring a governance path that reconciles technological empowerment and plural values. However, existing interpretations of China's experience remain largely at the level of policy description, or vaguely attribute it to "government leadership," without revealing its internal structural characteristics and operational logic. It is precisely this scholarly gap that constitutes the starting point of this paper [3].

This paper asks: Through what structural pathways does China's technology governance in the AI era achieve the synergy between "technological empowerment" and "value balance"? What are its internal mechanisms and model characteristics? To answer this question, this paper constructs a dual-pathway analytical framework of "technology-driven modernization of state governance" and "technology-embedded multi-actor social co-governance," systematically examines the division of labor, synergistic mechanisms, and functional integration of the two pathways, and thereby distills the model characteristics and theoretical implications of China's technology governance.

2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: THE DUAL PATHWAYS OF TECHNOLOGY GOVERNANCE

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A clear analytical framework is essential for addressing the problem of "structural fragmentation." This section first defines the core concepts, then explains the rationale for distinguishing the dual pathways and their theoretical connotations, and finally clarifies the logical relationship between the two pathways.

2.1 Conceptual Evolution and Analytical Perspectives of Technology Governance

In academic discourse, "technology governance" denotes two orientations: first, "governance by technology," which emphasizes technology as a governance tool for improving public administration effectiveness; second, "governance of technology," which focuses on regulating and guiding the risks of technology application. The AI era has deeply intertwined these two orientations-technology is both a means of governance and, due to its complex effects, an object of governance [4].

Theoretically, early research was strongly shaped by technological determinism and tended to treat technology governance as efficiency-oriented instrumental application, focusing on process optimization and cost reduction. As issues such as data monopoly, and the digital divide gained prominence, scholars began to question the limitations of a single efficiency orientation and turned to public-value concerns in technology governance, such as fairness, justice, and participation. Dunleavy et al.'s "Digital-Era Governance" theory recognized the tension between technology application and public values relatively early but did not provide a systematic explanatory framework. In recent years, the emergence of concepts such as "agile governance" and "experimentalist governance" reflects ongoing scholarly exploration of how to reconcile innovation efficiency with value security [5].

The uniqueness of China's technology governance lies in the fact that it is not simply technology application or risk control; rather, within a relatively short period, it simultaneously carries multiple goals, including improving administrative effectiveness, promoting equalization of public services, preventing technological risks, and reshaping governance institutions. This composite characteristic means that a single-dimensional analytical framework cannot fully explain its operational logic, and a more integrative pathway perspective is needed [6].

2.2 Basis for Dividing the Dual Pathways and Their Theoretical Connotations

China's AI-era technology governance unfolds primarily through two structural pathways. This division reflects differences in the subject positioning and core objectives of technology application.

Pathway One: Technology-driven modernization of state governance. This pathway is government-centered, with the core objective of using digital technology to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of the state governance system. Its principal vehicles include digital government development, smart city operations, and government data governance. This pathway follows a logic of state capacity building-strengthening government capacities in information collection, analysis and judgment, decision execution, and public services through technological means, and driving a shift in bureaucratic operations from "experience-driven" to "data-driven." Its governance functions primarily target efficiency improvement and institutional reconstruction: on the one hand, it addresses the cumbersome processes and delayed responses of traditional governance; on the other hand, it compels organizational process reengineering and the optimization of authority-responsibility relationships.

Pathway Two: Technology-embedded multi-actor social co-governance. This pathway features collaborative interaction between the government and multiple social actors. Its core objective is to unlock technology's social utility while preventing technological risks and safeguarding public values. Its principal vehicles include AI-enabled public services, regulatory sandbox pilots, algorithm governance institutions, and digital village construction. This pathway follows a logic of coupling social empowerment with risk prevention and control. It promotes both the precision and equalization of technology across social fields and the regulation and guidance of technology application through institutional design. Its governance functions primarily target equity promotion and security assurance: on the one hand, it narrows the digital divide by extending technology downward and promotes balanced allocation of public resources; on the other hand, it guards against algorithmic risks and data security hazards through institutional norms.

The core distinction between the two pathways can be summarized as follows: Pathway One focuses on "the state using technology to improve its own governance capacity," while Pathway Two focuses on "the state guiding technology to serve society and prevent its risks." This distinction corresponds to the dual connotations of the concept of "technology governance"-Pathway One corresponds to "governance by technology," while Pathway Two corresponds to the combination of "governance of technology" and social empowerment.

2.3 The Synergistic Logic of the Dual Pathways

The dual pathways are not parallel, unrelated tracks; rather, they generate synergistic effects through functional complementarity and institutional coupling.

In terms of functional complementarity, Pathway One, through the digital transformation of government governance, provides infrastructure, institutional frameworks, and a data foundation for technology-enabled social empowerment; Pathway Two, through multi-actor social co-governance, feeds risk exposure and value demands arising from technology application back into the institutional domain, thereby promoting continuous optimization of Pathway One. For instance, improvements in government data platforms support the precision of AI-enabled public services, while risks exposed in regulatory sandboxes have prompted the introduction of the algorithm filing system. Together, these dynamics constitute a dynamic cycle of "capacity building-risk feedback-institutional adjustment."

In terms of institutional coupling, the two pathways rest on three shared foundations: first, the world's largest digital infrastructure system, providing a hardware foundation for technology application; second, an evolving body of algorithm governance and data protection laws and regulations, providing a rule framework for risk prevention and control; third, a decision-making mechanism that combines central coordination with local pilots, creating flexible space for institutional innovation. These foundations enable the dual pathways to achieve overall synergy while maintaining their respective functional orientations.

Drawing on this analytical framework, the following sections examine the operational patterns and synergistic mechanisms of the dual pathways in China's technology governance practice.

3 SYNERGISTIC PRACTICE OF THE DUAL PATHWAYS

A theoretical framework requires empirical testing and enrichment. This paper examines typical practices in China in recent years in digital government, smart cities, and AI governance, analyzing how the two pathways respectively perform different governance functions and achieve synergistic integration in actual operation.

3.1 Pathway One: Technology-Driven Enhancement of State Governance Effectiveness

Pathway One centers on reconstructing government operations through digital technology and enhancing the efficiency and institutional responsiveness of the state governance system. Its practical development unfolds at three levels.

First, reengineering government service processes. The "one-stop online government services" and "at most one visit" reforms are typical of this level. By integrating approval and service items scattered across departments and building a unified online government platform, they achieve cross-departmental and cross-level data sharing and business collaboration. Shanghai's "one-network unified management" platform, for example, integrates dozens of categories of data, including urban operations, public security, and ecological environment, and creates a closed-loop governance system of real-time monitoring, intelligent early warning, and rapid response. Zhejiang's "at most one visit" reform uses data sharing and process optimization to integrate approval matters originally involving multiple departments and windows into a single application, one-window acceptance, and one-network processing. The essence of these practices is to use data flows to loosen bureaucratic barriers and promote the transformation of administrative processes from departmental segmentation to coordinated integration [7].

Second, digitalization of smart cities and grassroots governance. The development of "urban brains" in cities such as Shenzhen and Hangzhou integrates urban operational data across transportation, healthcare, environmental protection, and energy to achieve intelligent scheduling and optimal allocation of public resources. In grassroots governance, digital platforms connect grid data, public demands, and departmental responsibilities, promoting a shift from "passive response" to "active prevention." Notably, technology application at this level is not merely a matter of "system launch"; it entails the reconfiguration of governance power and deep adjustment of organizational relationships-data centralization inevitably requires corresponding adjustments in decision-making authority, and the efficient operation of technology platforms depends on the institutionalization of cross-departmental coordination mechanisms [8].

Third, data governance and cross-departmental collaboration. As a core production factor in the digital age, data's flow efficiency directly determines the governance effectiveness of Pathway One. By establishing unified data-sharing and exchange platforms and standardizing the processes of data collection, storage, transmission, and use, China promotes cross-departmental, cross-regional, and cross-level interconnection of government data. During the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-departmental data collaboration enabled the tracking of movement trajectories and precise risk screening, demonstrating the effectiveness of data governance in emergency management. In routine governance, data sharing has supported government service optimization goals such as "reducing materials, reducing processes, and reducing time limits." The essence of this level is to use data standardization to promote governance standardization and information symmetry to improve the scientific basis of decision-making.

3.2 Pathway Two: Technology-Embedded Multi-Actor Social Co-Governance

If Pathway One focuses on strengthening state capacity, Pathway Two focuses on the socialized application of technology and risk governance. Its operation likewise unfolds along three dimensions.

First, AI-enabled public services and social empowerment. Extending technology downward is a core orientation of Pathway Two. In remote areas, applications such as telemedicine, online education, and digital government services extend high-quality public services to the grassroots, somewhat alleviating the problem of uneven resource distribution. The "Gui Xiao She" AI social worker in Guigang, Guangxi, responds to public inquiries around the clock, effectively compensating for grassroots staffing shortages; the use of AI-assisted diagnostic systems in some less-developed areas has improved grassroots medical service capacity. A common feature of these practices is that technology is no longer merely an efficiency-oriented management tool but has become a means of social empowerment that promotes balanced allocation of public resources.

Second, regulatory sandboxes and inclusive, prudential risk prevention and control. Given the uncertainty generated by rapid technological iteration, "one-size-fits-all" rigid regulation may stifle innovation and lose governance effectiveness because institutional supply lags behind. Drawing on the experimentalist logic of "crossing the river by feeling the stones," China has developed a regulatory sandbox mechanism based on the principles of "limited scope, pilot first, risk isolation, and scaled promotion after maturity." The State Administration for Market Regulation launched an

automotive safety sandbox regulation pilot, involving 11 enterprises, including BYD, Leapmotor, and Great Wall, and containing pilot risks through a fourfold isolation mechanism and privacy-enhancing technologies. Article 65 of the Shanghai Municipal Regulations on Promoting the Development of the Artificial Intelligence Industry explicitly provides for tiered AI governance and sandbox regulation. The core value of this mechanism lies in testing the risk boundaries and institutional needs of technology application within a controllable scope, replacing the binary choice of "laissez-faire or prohibition" with "managed experimentation" [9].

Third, institutional norms for algorithm governance and data security. Another important dimension of Pathway Two is the governance of technology application itself. In response to prominent problems such as algorithmic black boxes and data abuse, China has established an algorithm governance mechanism centered on algorithm filing and assessment, and has strengthened the legal and regulatory system represented by the Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law. The core function of these institutions is not to block technology application but to delineate compliance boundaries and establish accountability mechanisms for the social embedding of technology. Through closed-loop management of "filing-assessment-rectification-accountability," Pathway Two moves risk prevention and control from ex post remediation to process management.

3.3 Synergistic Mechanisms of the Dual Pathways: Institutional Conditions for Functional Integration

Pathway One and Pathway Two do not operate independently; rather, they achieve functional integration through multiple mechanisms. This integration depends on three key institutional conditions.

First, bidirectional empowerment through the data foundation. A unified data-sharing platform both supports Pathway One in improving governance effectiveness and underpins Pathway Two in achieving precision services. The open sharing of government data-provided that privacy and security are ensured-provides "raw materials" for AI to empower public services; conversely, data feedback generated in social application scenarios provides richer real-time information for government governance decisions. In this process, data serve as the "capillaries" connecting the two pathways.

Second, bidirectional learning through institutional experimentation. Pilot mechanisms such as regulatory sandboxes constitute a feedback channel between Pathway One and Pathway Two. The technological risks and institutional gaps exposed in sandboxes not only improve norms in Pathway Two, such as the introduction of algorithm governance policies, but also feed back into institutional design in Pathway One, such as dynamic adjustment of data-sharing standards. This bidirectional learning mechanism enables the two pathways to continuously adjust according to practical effects, avoiding structural disconnects between institutional supply and technological development.

Third, institutionalized anchoring of value consensus. The fundamental reason the two pathways can be synergistic rather than conflicting is that they share the value orientation of "people-centered" development. This value consensus is concretized through institutional design in two ways: in Pathway One, the orientation toward a service-oriented government-digitalization is not management for its own sake but a means of improving the accessibility and satisfaction of public services; in Pathway Two, the principle of inclusive prudence-regulation is not restriction for its own sake but a means of releasing technological dividends under the premise of ensuring security. This institutionalized anchoring of value consensus provides directional constraints for the functional integration of the two pathways.

In summary, the dual pathways of China's technology governance generate synergy through data interconnection, institutional feedback, and value consensus, jointly achieving the organic integration of four major governance functions: efficiency improvement, equity promotion, security assurance, and institutional reconstruction.

4 MODEL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINA'S TECHNOLOGY GOVERNANCE: THEORETICAL CONNOTATIONS OF "ENABLING GOVERNANCE"

Building on the preceding analysis, this chapter distills the model characteristics of China's technology governance, proposes the concept of "enabling governance," and explains its theoretical connotations and comparative significance.

4.1 From Empirical Characteristics to Theoretical Abstraction: Three Core Features

Based on the examination of the synergistic operation of the dual pathways, China's technology governance exhibits three interrelated core features.

Feature One: Pluralistic collaboration grounded in state capacity. Unlike the Western model of "market-led, government-regulated" governance, China's technology governance takes strong state capacity as its institutional foundation. This capacity manifests at three levels: strategic planning capacity—for example, the 15th Five-Year Plan Outline explicitly advances the "AI Plus" initiative, providing top-level design for national technology governance; institutional supply capacity—building a normative system through the Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law, among others, to delineate a rule-of-law framework for technology application; resource integration capacity—coordinating digital infrastructure development and government-industry-academia-research collaboration, providing hardware and talent support for technological empowerment. On this foundation, local governments, enterprises, social organizations, and other actors gain space for participation; state capacity does not exclude pluralistic participation but provides institutional guarantees for orderly participation.

Feature Two: Institutional flexibility under experimentalist logic. Mechanisms such as regulatory sandboxes and local pilots indicate that China's technology governance has significant institutional flexibility. This flexibility is evident in

several respects: above the security baseline set by the central government, local governments and enterprises are allowed to conduct differentiated experimentation; in the early stage of technology application, a gradual path of observation—assessment—normalization replaces the traditional model of "legislation first"; and, where risks are controllable, space is reserved for new business forms and new technologies. This feature aligns closely with experimentalist governance theory, but the distinctive feature of China's practice is its tiered experimentation structure—national pilot zones, provincial pilots, and local innovations form a multi-layered nested experimental system, enabling institutional learning to circulate and feed back across levels.

Feature Three: Institutionalized reconciliation of instrumental and value rationality. The most distinctive feature of China's technology governance is its continuous reconciliation, through institutional design, of tensions among "efficiency" and "norms," "innovation" and "security," and "technological empowerment" and "value balance." The algorithm filing system's positioning as "filing rather than approval" embodies a governance philosophy of "guidance rather than prohibition"; the design of regulatory sandboxes to isolate rather than spread risks embodies a regulatory orientation of "encouraging innovation rather than laissez-faire"; the strategy in digital village construction of extending technology to the grassroots rather than fostering technology dependence embodies a development philosophy of "empowerment rather than replacement." This reconciliation is not a one-time institutional arrangement but an ongoing process of institutionalization through dynamic policy iteration—as noted above, the promulgation of the Measures for the Administration of Artificial Intelligence Meteorological Application Services is a typical case of technological development driving institutional improvement and institutional norms feeding back into technology application.

4.2 "Enabling Governance": A Paradigm Distillation of China's Technology Governance

These three features jointly point to a more integrative theoretical concept—"Enabling Governance." This paper defines it as a governance paradigm that takes state capacity as its institutional foundation, institutional flexibility as its operational safeguard, and the synergistic realization of plural public values as its core objective.

"Enabling Governance" is distinct from two ideal types: first, efficiency-oriented governance under technological determinism, which equates technology application with efficiency improvement while ignoring other public values; second, defensive governance oriented toward risk avoidance, which excessively restricts technological innovation in the name of security and falls into the dilemma of "conservative governance." The core of enabling governance lies in simultaneously "adding" and "subtracting." "Adding" means strengthening governance capacity and expanding service accessibility through technological means; "subtracting" means constraining the negative externalities of technology and safeguarding equity and security through institutional norms. This dynamic balance between addition and subtraction captures the essential meaning of "technological empowerment and value balance" in the title of this paper.

From a comparative perspective, enabling governance differs importantly from the concept of "agile governance" in Western digital governance theory. Agile governance emphasizes rapid response and flexible adjustment to technological change, focusing on institutional adaptability over time; enabling governance, while emphasizing institutional flexibility, places greater emphasis on pluralistic balance in the value dimension—the governance objective is not only to be fast but also to be good, that is, to balance efficiency, equity, security, and the rule of law. This difference is rooted in distinct institutional contexts: China's "people-centered" governance philosophy provides a clear value anchor for technology governance, giving the institutional reconciliation between empowerment and balance a normative foundation that transcends instrumental rationality [10].

4.3 Theoretical Contributions and Applicable Boundaries of "Enabling Governance"

The theoretical contribution of the concept of enabling governance lies in offering an analytical pathway that transcends the "trade-off view" for understanding the relationship between empowerment and balance in technology governance in the AI era. It shows that efficiency and norms, and innovation and security, are not zero-sum; through appropriate institutional design, they can move toward synergy rather than conflict. This finding has important implications for global digital governance.

It should be noted cautiously, however, that the effectiveness of enabling governance depends heavily on specific institutional contexts. Its operation requires at least three preconditions: first, relatively strong state capacity to coordinate planning, integrate resources, and maintain institutional coherence; second, an effective central-local learning mechanism that allows local pilot experience to feed back into top-level institutional design; third, a relatively high degree of consensus among social actors on governance objectives, providing a non-institutional social foundation for value balance. Countries lacking these conditions may face the dilemma of "capacity without flexibility" or "flexibility without consensus" when transplanting enabling governance experience. Therefore, the core lesson of China's experience lies not in providing a replicable template but in demonstrating the more universal governance insight that plural governance objectives can be reconciled through institutional design.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper takes "technological empowerment and value balance" as its central problematic and constructs a dual-pathway analytical framework of "technology-driven modernization of state governance" and "technology-embedded multi-actor social co-governance," systematically examining the operational logic and model characteristics of China's technology governance in the AI era. The study finds that China's technology governance

transcends the instrumentalist logic of a single efficiency orientation and exhibits the structural characteristic of dual pathways operating synergistically: Pathway One, carried by the digital transformation of the state governance system, performs the functions of efficiency improvement and institutional reconstruction; Pathway Two, oriented toward the social embedding of technology and risk regulation, performs the functions of equity promotion and security assurance. The two pathways are not merely superimposed or parallel; rather, through the institutionalized coupling of three mechanisms—bidirectional empowerment of the data foundation, bidirectional learning through institutional experimentation, and institutionalized anchoring of value consensus—they achieve the organic integration of plural governance functions. This finding indicates that the tension between empowerment and balance can be resolved through structural pathway design and institutional coordination mechanisms; the two are not zero-sum.

Based on these empirical findings, this paper further distills the theoretical concept of enabling governance, defining it as a governance paradigm that takes state capacity as its institutional foundation, institutional flexibility as its operational safeguard, and the synergistic realization of plural public values as its core objective. Compared with the agile governance orientation in Western digital governance theory, enabling governance not only emphasizes rapid institutional response to technological change but also emphasizes the institutionalized reconciliation of plural values such as efficiency, equity, security, and the rule of law. The value of this concept lies in the following: it offers an analytical pathway beyond the traditional trade-off view for understanding the synergistic relationship between empowerment and balance in technology governance in the AI era; at the same time, by revealing the context dependence of China's experience—namely, that the effective operation of enabling governance presupposes relatively strong state capacity, an effective central-local learning mechanism, and broad social consensus—it avoids the theoretical risk of simply universalizing local practice and provides an operational middle-range concept for comparative research on global digital governance.

As a macro-level theoretical analysis, this study has limitations in thick description of mechanisms and empirical verification. Future research can proceed in two directions: first, through in-depth case studies, such as tracking specific smart city projects or regulatory sandbox pilots, to provide micro-level verification of the specific operational details of the dual-pathway synergy mechanism; second, through cross-national comparative analysis, such as comparing technology governance pathways between China and Southeast Asian countries, to test the applicability and variability of the enabling governance framework under different institutional contexts. In addition, as new technologies such as generative AI continue to emerge, the objects and risk structures of technology governance are undergoing rapid changes. Whether the enabling governance framework can effectively respond to governance challenges in new contexts remains subject to ongoing scholarly observation and theoretical refinement.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

Supported by the Special Task Project of Ministry of Education Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences of China "A Study on the Theoretical Logic and Practical Path of Integrating International Political Elements into the Teaching of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in the New Era" (Project No 24JDSZK184); Supported by the Guangdong Association of Higher Education project "Exploring the Pathways for Generative Artificial Intelligence to Empower the Teaching of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Private Colleges and Universities" (Project No 2026GJXH201).

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