



# Delicate Wire-walking: How Chinese Social Media Balances Policy Regulations, Market Interests and Personal Aspirations



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## Abstract

The Chinese social media governance with the government at the core have been criticized by the Western media and society. It is understood that China's governance on social media is moving in a dangerous direction as the internal tension is intense. So, what kind of social media governance is effective and proper for China? How do we understand China's governance on social media? The purpose of this paper is to analyze China's social media system through multi-agent collaborative system. It is hold that China's social media governance is an effective balancing art among different actors. Just like high wire walking, the government, enterprises and individuals, as the main agents of the state, market and society, have formed a delicate relationship structure with social media as the platform, and have been moving forward steadily towards the goal of balancing national security, market efficiency and social interactions. As it turned out, the national active intervention policy which gives priority to national security is more in line with China's reality, which matches with China's social customs, legal tradition, national security concept and people's behavior habits.

**Keywords:** Social media; Governance; Multi-agent collaborative system; Cyber sovereignty; Social interaction

**Abbreviations:** Social Networking Sites (SNS); C2C (Consumer to Consumer); Virtual Private Network (VPN); Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC); Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference(CPPCC)

## Introduction

China's social media governance is criticized broadly by the Western media and society. it is understood that China's governance on social media is moving in a dangerous direction as the internal tension is intense. This paper holds that the traditional view of social media governance in China is biased. In fact, China's social media governance is just like high wire walking. The skill of high wire walking has a long history in China. Performers can walk on the tight rope like walking on the ground by holding a long pole horizontally. Mastering the skill of balance is the key to their ability to walk fast and steadily. Because of the balanced beam of multi-agent collaborative system, the government, enterprises and individuals, as the main bodies of the state, market and society, have formed a collaborative relationship structure with social media as the platform. This kind of relationship structure, with the function of jointly constructing and constantly improving the online social life paradigm and cooperation framework, enables the steady development of China's social media, and unifies the

maintenance of social order and national security, economic order, and public opinion ecology. With the continuous development and exploration of China, the internal and external channels of social media under criticism will become more and more smooth.

What is "social media"? In China, social media is also known as social networking media. There is also a concept of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in Western academia, which emphasizes the generation of interpersonal relationships. Social media has a wide range of functions, including social networking, entertainment, news and other functional services. Different platforms have different emphases. According to the different attributes of social media, some researchers classify them into five categories: the first is creative publishing, which is mainly composed of blog, message boards and micro blog; the second is resource sharing, such as photo sharing, video sharing, online music and review; the third is collaborative editing, including Wikipedia and Q & A sites; the fourth is social service, such as

SNS, instant message, mobile chat; the fifth is C2C (consumer to consumer) business, such as online trade and deal-of-the-day [1].

Therefore, it can be considered that “social media is an interactive community based on Internet technology, especially Web2.0. Its greatest feature is to give everyone the ability to create and disseminate content. It is a media for social interaction and a way of social interaction through ubiquitous communication tools” [2]. The social media in this paper emphasizes the interaction, social networking and resource sharing, and refers to common social media such as microblogs, videos or pictures or other resource sharing and interactive websites.

The social media crisis is the biggest focus of Internet Freedom Report in recent years. Its latest report points out that the two biggest global factors contributing to the decline in Internet freedom are increased government monitoring of social media and electoral intervention through digital media [3]. In addition, it is difficult to block the spread of malicious content, such as terrorism and violence. Due to the increasingly prominent monopoly problem of large-scale Internet media platform, the anti-monopoly rules have been paid more and more attention by many governments. It can be predicted that social media will become an important factor in promoting social and political changes, and the governance capacity and governance system of social media will also become an important concern of various countries.

Western mainstream voices have always believed that China, as an authoritarian state, has imposed strict restrictions on social media. In Western views, China is walking on a high wire or tight rope and will fall to the ground and be broken into pieces if there is a slight carelessness, just as the mobilization through social media in the Arab Spring resulted in regime changes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. As a big developing country, by December 2021, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1032 million, and the Internet penetration rate has reached 73% [4]. The world's major Internet media companies are concentrated mostly in the United States and China, so China's performance has attracted much attention. However, the governance of social media in China is still moving forward steadily despite of doubt and criticism. Under the pandemic situation, social media has even played an unprecedented important role in combatting the pandemic spread. China's Internet governance model has been gradually recognized by some neighboring countries. Is China's social media governance the choice of the dictator or

of brave pioneer? Is it a helpless move when besieged on all sides or a deliberate means of check and balance? Just like the implementation of the socialist market economy in the beginning period of reform and opening up, China's social media is also inching forward, carefully looking for the best solution under China's national conditions and overseas public opinion. And the purpose of this paper is to explain China's social media governance is an effective balancing art among different actors.

### Literature Review

On the issue of social media regulation in China, there are three main perspectives. First, to discuss the legitimacy of China's Internet restrictions. From the theoretical basis, both the school of cyber liberalism<sup>1</sup> and the school of cyber realism<sup>2</sup> believe that the effective control of the network can be achieved by the self-discipline and technical means instead of the law. As a result, they are critical of China's obvious Internet control and social media governance system. Based on pre-set that government regulation is wrong, Western media and organizations, such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), criticize China's freedom of the Internet [3] and the freedom of the press [5] in their annual reports. However, some scholars have concluded the legitimacy of regulation from the aspects of the risk and externality of the Internet. They think that only relying on the self-discipline and technical means of business agents cannot solve the existing problems of cyberspace [3]. The cyberspace breeds a virtual community, but its members are living individuals in the real society. China's attitude is shown in its theory of “cyber sovereignty<sup>3</sup>”. In fact, more and more people and countries begin to agree that the government should play a role in cyber governance and social media governance.

Secondly, to discuss the scope and form of social media restrictions in China, and if the regulatory methods and restrictions in China are unreasonable. The Western criticism of Chinese social media restrictions mainly focuses on three aspects: setting up access barriers, restricting and manipulating content, and infringing on users' rights. The criticism of access barriers is mainly about the Chinese government's blocking the entry of specific applications or technologies, especially the attack on virtual private network (VPN) [6]. The criticism of content restrictions mainly focuses on the censorship and self-censorship of social media platforms and the censorship of news media content, especially about social and political activities [5]. The critics of the infringement of user rights mainly measures the legal protection and restriction of online

<sup>1</sup>Cyber liberalism advocates network self-control and rejects the intervention of international law, as explained in A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace written by John Perry Barlow.

<sup>2</sup>According to Professor Lessig's four elements of cyber regulation, the order of cyberspace can be achieved by using code as a technical means. Lawrence Lessig. 1999. The Law of Horse: What Cyberlaw Might Teach. Harvard Law Review.

<sup>3</sup>In addition to being a natural extension of national sovereignty in cyberspace, cyber sovereignty is also the supreme power and external independence that a country enjoys based on national sovereignty of its network facilities, network entities, network behaviors, and related network data and information.

activities, and the attitude towards privacy monitoring. China has been criticized for adopting a central regulatory model and relying more on government directives than on self-regulation [7]. Correspondingly, there are also views that national security is the key to social media governance [1]. Therefore, the bottom line of all regulatory actions is national security. When the two contradict, national security comes first. China's strict regulation also reflects the characteristics of China's national conditions.

Thirdly, to discuss the effectiveness of social media regulation in China and hold that the social media governance in China are ineffective and will gradually lose control. This kind of ineffectiveness is firstly manifested in the imbalance between the excessive control of political content and the increasing social problems such as pornography, online violence and gambling, which is due to the resource imbalance between the regulatory authorities and the regulated institutions as the state has spent most of its energy on controlling the political discussions and related issues while only little attention is drawn on other social harm [8]. At the same time, it has not completely prevented foreign investment in Internet related services from flowing into China [9]. Secondly, it lies in the contradiction between the interests of the private agents (private companies) and the State decrees.

Some scholars think that in China's social media regulation system, sometimes there will be incidents of using and disdaining the principal (government) instructions for the purpose of their own commercial interests, which leads to the classic principal-agent problem, that is, the agent who is responsible for acting on behalf of the principal is encouraged to act in his / her best interests, even if these interests conflict with the interests of the

principal [10]. The main reason for this ineffectiveness is that there are not enough specific and general laws and regulations on social media and even network governance in China, and the usual political orders are vague, resulting in large operation space [9]. But on the other hand, in addition to the fact of its internal stability and development, there are at least two changes in China's social media regulation. First, the Chinese government has become more adaptive and active in restricting media content through the existing regulatory methods [9]. Second, the network control is not a simple set of fixed rules, but a system that will be relaxed and tightened according to the social situation and public opinion [9].

Generally speaking, due to different political philosophy and national conditions, there are different opinions and analyses on the governance of social media in China. Western scholars focus on the individual freedom, while Chinese scholars pay more attention to the protection of national security in the analysis of China's social media governance. The essence of both approaches is for the development of individuals and even the country. This paper is to combine these perspectives and establish a framework to illustrate the multi-agent cooperation system of social media governance in China, so as to show that China's social media governance scheme seems dangerous, but in essence, it is steadily moving forward after balancing various indicators. This cooperation structure is formed between the multiple agents on the platform of social media, with the function of jointly constructing and constantly improving the online social life paradigm and cooperation framework. It is the organizational basis for the realization of the effective goal of China's social media governance, and also the balance bar to ensure China's steady progress on the high wire.

**Balancing Bar: Multi-agent collaborative model of social media governance in China**

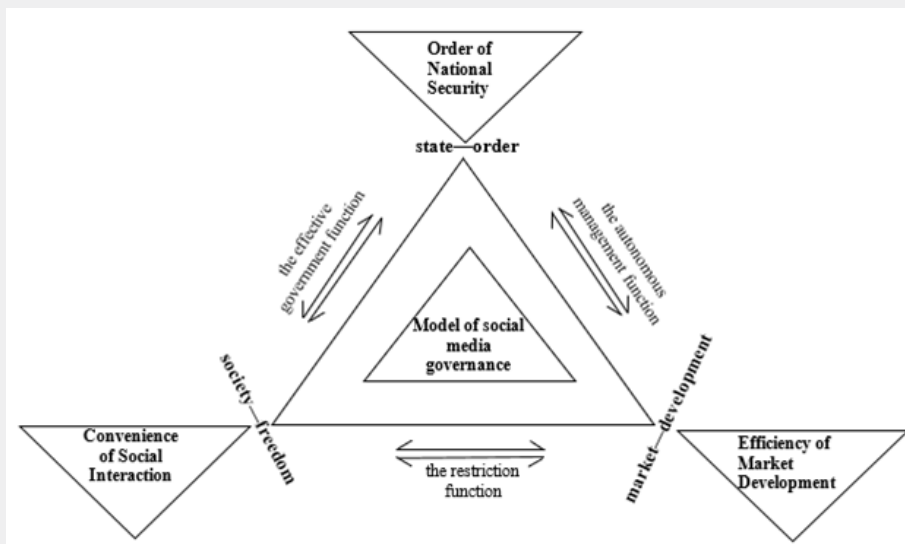


Figure 1: Multi-agent collaborative model of social media governance in China.

<sup>4</sup>In the Cyber Sovereignty Declaration released by 2020 World Internet Conference, the cyber sovereignty theory proposed by Chinese scholars was introduced and described in detail. It was then revised in the 2021 World Internet Conference.

The governance of social media is the process to make online practice organized. Its macro form is the order of national security, the economic form is the efficiency of market development, and the micro form is the convenience of social interaction.

In China, the core goal of social media governance is to achieve the unity of order, development and freedom from the three levels of state, market and society. In other words, the effectiveness of social media governance is reflected in the balance of order, development and freedom, which requires the unity of social order and national security, economic order and public opinion ecology, rather than the victory of a single element. More importantly, the governance effectiveness of social media is not only reflected in the indispensable three elements, but also in the mutual promotion and restriction of the three. How to achieve the delicate balance of the three is an important problem facing China and other countries in the world (Figure 1).

### Order of National Security

From the perspective of the three elements of multi-agent collaborative governance model, the first element of social media governance in China is the order and security at the national level. The key to the establishment of a stable society is to establish a good social order. "Cyber sovereignty" is the theoretical starting point of China's social media governance. In recent years, there are differences in the degree of recognition of this concept on the international stage. For example, Russia highly identifies with cyber sovereignty, but many western countries keep a distance from the concept of cyber sovereignty. However, in practical actions, countries all over the world are exercising cyber sovereignty through legislative, administrative, judicial and other practical activities. The obligation of cyber sovereignty points out that "all countries have the obligation to protect the legitimate rights and interests of relevant cyberspace agents within their jurisdiction, and also have the obligation to promote the openness and freedom of cyberspace while ensuring the order, security and development of cyberspace". The cultural content in social media is becoming a huge driving force for public opinion generation and social mobilization, which brings important risks in social management and social order maintenance. Social media has played a significant role in boosting the "Twitter revolution" and "Révolution de jasmin" in Moldova, Tunisia, Egypt, Iran about 10 years ago. Social media can also be seen in many public events such as the "Occupy Wall Street" in the United States and the London riots in Britain in 2011.

China also faces major social risks such as social media public events. Because the online society is composed of people in the real society, the actors in cyberspace also have the basic social attributes. This property will not change in essence as people's behavior move from "offline" to "online". Therefore, it is one of the important contents of social media governance whether all kinds of activities of netizens on social media platform can be carried

out orderly and normally. The government should constantly improve and construct the online rules and ethics standards which conform to the "virtualization" characteristics of the network society. In addition, the government needs to guide netizens to regulate their online behavior through information disclosure and strengthen people's conscious identification and effective practice conforming to online social behavior norms.

### Efficiency of Market Development

Another element of social media governance in China is development efficiency at the market level. Promoting development of digital economy and its integration with physical economy is the key to promote national economic development. At present, the international economic situation is complex, trade frictions continue to escalate, the pandemic situation continues to affect world economic circulation, the global economic recovery momentum is weakening, and the world economy is in the shifting period. As a new driving force for global economic development, digital economy has been paid more and more attention, and countries have been accelerating the strategic deployment of digital economy. The externality of economic activities is an important reason for the demand of governance. Because of the market mechanism failure in the allocation of resources, economic activities have negative externalities. Therefore, it is necessary for the government to play its role in resource allocation, so as to curb or eliminate the negative externality's impact on public interests and social interests [11]. For China and other countries in the world, the establishment of a good cyberspace social and commercial order is an important guarantee for the digitization and networking of economic activities. The rise of e-commerce has led to the reform of the physical economy. The integration of economic activities, the flattening of management structure, as well as the fuzzy boundaries between consumers, operators and producers, have become the characteristics of cyberspace economy [12]. In such a field with natural monopoly and information deviation, in order to prevent the low efficiency of resource allocation and ensure the fair use of resources, government could use legal authority to manage the entry and exit of enterprises, the quantity of prices, the quality of services, investment and financial pooling. Solid productivity and economic foundation are the cornerstone of a country's stability. In such a developing socialist country as China, both the government and enterprises need to take the responsibility of promoting efficiency in the development of digital economy.

### Convenience of Social Interaction

The last element of social media governance of China is the social expression and convenience of social interaction. That is to say, to establish a good network ecological environment with interactive channels is the key to safeguard civil rights. In the social media era, people obtain massive information through all kinds of platforms. However, the improvement of informatization

has not eliminated the contradictions and differences between heterogeneous cultures. This difference is not only reflected in the political system, economic system, values, ethics, cultural traditions, and many other aspects. At the same time, it also reflects people's different understanding of the meaning of openness, equality, freedom and sharing. Under the diversified mode of media in the field of public opinion, the governance of social media should first meet the needs of individual expression and interaction. The information technology is integrating into the people's life at an unprecedented speed, breadth, and depth.

However, in practice, individuals, enterprises, and governments, as the main agents of society, market and country, have many identical and different interest, propositions and goals, which leads to the relationship of coordination, coexistence, competition and conflict in the governance of social media. Therefore, in the multi-agent structure, social media governance is not only limited to government roles, but also includes the roles of other agents and the society itself. It should be a coordinated activity and an orderly process carried out by multiple agents in a diversified form. Because the multi-agent structure can produce synergistic effect in the interaction, it has great advantages. Based on this governance structure, the government will be committed to the formation of a large environment to recognize, protect and promote the virtual society; the netizens, network organizations and Internet enterprises should also cultivate a high-level dialogue ability and efficient coordination mechanism through self-improvement.

A complete multi-agent structure should include at least three functions: the first is the autonomous management function of each agent. Although the multi-agent structure can have a guider, it is not based on the formal authority relationship, but based on the mutual symbiotic logic of common norms. The second is the effective government function. Compared with "self-discipline", the government's "heteronomy" is not only its duty, but also provides the institutional framework for solving network disputes. The third is the restriction function between multiple agents. It requires all kinds of network agents to treat different demands equally, to participate in virtual practice normatively, and to negotiate rationally about social media governance.

In short, China's social media governance system is not the denial of Internet freedom, human rights and cyberspace connectivity in the Western demonization vision, but the unity of internal and external dimensions. For developing countries such as China, the right to subsistence, development and security are the primary basic human rights; economic rights, social and cultural rights, political rights and civil rights are equally indispensable. In addition, China believes that collective human rights and individual human rights are inseparable and interrelated and should be treated equally. This is also the philosophical basis of the multi-agent governance model proposed in this paper. The ultimate goal the China's of social media governance is, first

of all, to safeguard national interests and prevent attacks and disturbances from hostile forces; second, to respect the law of the network society, development safeguard and realize the rights and interests of individuals and institutions and build a stable and good cyberspace social order [11].

### Wire-walking: Practice of China's Social Media Governance

Based on the multi-agent governance model of social media in China, and by comparing the governance objectives with the ideal governance system, China has actually been trying to approach one by one in practice. In order to achieve the unity of order, development, and freedom at the three levels of state, market and society, China has made many efforts.

#### At the national level

The government plays a leading role in the social media governance at the national level. In recent years, the Chinese government has made a lot of efforts in social media governance through the construction of laws and regulations, special actions, technical specifications. One example is the national criminal law. In order to maintain national security and social stability, if one of the following acts constitutes a crime, he shall be investigated for criminal responsibility in accordance with the provisions of the criminal law: (1) using the Internet to spread rumors, slander, to publish or disseminate other harmful information to incite subversion of state power, overthrow of the socialist system, or incitement to split the country and undermine national unity; (2) Stealing and divulging state secrets, intelligence or military secrets through the Internet; (3) using the Internet to incite ethnic hatred and discrimination and undermine national unity; (4) using the Internet to organize cult organizations and contact members of cult organizations to undermine the implementation of state laws and administrative laws [13].

In the specific fields of laws and regulations, in 1997, the leading group of informatization work of the State Council issued the Measures for the Implementation of the Interim Provisions of the People's Republic of China on the Management of the International Networking. Part of the illegal VPN building, and trading behavior is in violation of Article 6 and Article 14 of this implementation measures [13]. After the promulgation of the Cybersecurity Law of China in 2016 as the basic law in China's network field, [14] the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) issued the "Internet News Information Service Management Regulations in 2017 [15]. In December 2019, it further issued "Regulations on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content" which specifies the scope, mode and technology for the governance of network information content [16]. In April 2020, the CAC issued the "Cybersecurity Review Measures", which stipulates the agent, object, content and procedure of cybersecurity review [17]. The purpose is to avoid cybersecurity risks and hazards in purchasing products and services, and to ensure the supply

chain security of key information infrastructure and maintain national security. In 2021, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed the Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law, further improving China’s cyber security legislation. These laws and regulations gradually

clarify the responsibilities and obligations of the government, enterprises, society, and netizens, which are of great significance to create a good social media ecological environment (Table 1).

**Table 1:** List of important regulations on cyber security in China.

	Issuing Time	Issuing Agency	Name of Regulations	Function
1	Dec. 1997	Leading Group of Informatization Work of the State Council	Implementation of the Interim Provisions of the People’s Republic of China on the Management of the International Networking	Strengthen the management of computer information network and international networking to ensure the healthy development of international computer information exchange
2	Nov. 2016	Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress	Cybersecurity Law of China	Basic law in the field of cybersecurity in China
3	May 2017	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Internet News Information Service Management Regulations	Internet news licensing regulations
4	Dec. 2019	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Regulations on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content	The scope, mode and technology of ecological governance of network information content
5	Apr. 2020	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), The National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology,...	Cybersecurity Review Measures	The executor, target, content and procedure of cybersecurity review are specified in order to avoid network security risks and hazards in purchasing products and services especially for information infrastructure supply chain.
6	Jun. 2021	Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress	Data Security Law	It is the first law in China that regulates the security of “data” and specifies the principles of regulation of “data”.
7	Aug. 2021	Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress	Personal Information Protection Law	Establishing the principles of personal information protection, regulating processing activities to protect rights and interests of individuals.

Enterprises are the executors of social media governance laws, regulations, and policies as well as the managers of the platform.

Different from foreign enterprises, Chinese social media platforms are more directly involved in governance and provide tools for government governance. After the promulgation of policies and regulations, a multi-level comprehensive governance system composed of government departments at all levels, network information service platform, network groups, forum builders and managers, and industry organizations will work through supervising as well as self-discipline, so as to ensure the effective implementation of social media ecological governance. In the “Regulations on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content”, Article 3 defines the overall coordination responsibilities of network information departments at all levels for the ecological governance of network information content; Article 8 defines the main responsibility of network information service platform in the governance and article 9 specifies the governance mechanism of them; Article 19 clarifies the responsibilities of the founder and manager of the network group and forum community; Article 27 encourages industry organizations to improve the industry self-discipline mechanism and review the content of network information [16].

In social media governance at the national level, individuals mainly play the role of self-management and to cooperate with

legitimate management behavior of government and enterprises. However, under the policy of national security as the bottom line, the individual’s interaction is restricted to a certain extent, mainly by the access barriers and content restrictions set by the government. On the one hand, because the factors from cyberspace and the factors from the real world can be coupled and intensified by each other, the online and offline linkage effect will be produced, and the huge risk of concurrency will be brought. Due to the technical, informational and instrumental connections between social media and the national security, political participation empowered by social media is the main way to affect the national security. Social media can mobilize political actions with its communication and organization functions, play a role of bridge and coordination between online and offline protests [18]. Just as the “Arab Spring” which was known as the “Twitter revolution” or “Facebook revolution”, it had a devastating impact on the stability of a country’s order. And this is an important reason for setting up access barriers by China.

On the other hand, in order to comply with a wide range of laws, regulations and guidelines related to social media governance, Chinese Internet companies have invested a certain amount of cost to increase their manpower and technology to monitor and

filter the information on their platforms through a combination of manual review and machine filtering technique. That said, important developments abroad can still be learned from China’s official social media platforms, press conferences, news outlets, and through unofficial channels as well. At the same time, there are still several ways to access Facebook and other blocked sites in China, despite the ban. First, virtual private network (VPN) is essential for travelers and foreigners living in China. Although VPNs are sometimes blocked, they are still available with the

tacit approval of the government. Second, there are also some proxy websites that can be used, such as Google academic and the internal websites of universities and enterprises. In fact, the digital access barriers have been considered to be lifted up in some new development zones and free trade zones in recent years, but it will take some time.

**At the market level**

**Table 2:** List of relevant regulations for China’s Internet industry from 2017 to 2022.

	Issuing Time	Issuing Agency	Name of Regulations	Function / Goal
1	Sep. 2017	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Three Year Action Plan for the Development of Industrial E-commerce	By 2020, an open, standardized, honest and safe industrial e-commerce industry ecology will be formed.
2	Oct. 2017	General Office of the State Council	Guidance on Actively Promoting the Innovation and Application of Supply Chain	Actively promote the transformation of traditional supply chain, form a batch of new technologies and models suitable for China’s national conditions, and basically form a smart supply chain system covering China’s key industries.
3	Nov. 2017	The State Council	Guiding Opinions on Deepening the Development of the ‘Internet + Advanced Manufacturing Industry’ in the Industrial Internet	Build an industrial Internet ecosystem that is compatible with China’s economic development, accelerate the construction and development of the industrial Internet, and promote the Internet, big data, artificial intelligence and the real economy.
4	May 2019	General Office of the CPC Central Committee, general office of the State Council	Outline of Digital Rural Development Strategy	Form a rural intelligent logistics distribution system, substantially narrow the “digital gap” between urban and rural areas, improve farmers’ digital literacy and realize agricultural and rural modernization.
5	Mar. 2020	General Office of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology	Notice of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on Accelerating the Development of Industrial Internet	Accelerate the expansion of integrated innovative applications, actively use the industrial Internet to promote the resumption of work and production, deepen the application of industrial Internet in industry, and promote enterprises to go to the cloud platform.
6	Apr. 2020	The National Development and Reform Commission, Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Implementation Plan for Promoting the Action of “Using Data to Enrich Wisdom” to Cultivate New Economic Development	Encourage Internet platform enterprises to rely on their own advantages to provide end-user intelligent data analysis services for small and medium-sized enterprises, emphasize the establishment of platforms, and build a multi-layer linkage industrial Internet platform to enable the digital transformation of small and medium-sized enterprises.
7	Nov. 2021	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology	The “Fourteenth Five-Year Plan” information technology and industrialization deep integration development plan	Put forward the goal that by 2025 the industrial Internet platform application penetration rate reaches 45%, the system solution service capability is significantly enhanced, and a new pattern of platform empowerment and integration development of large and medium-sized enterprises is formed.

At the market level, the government mainly plays a role in promoting and supervising the development of social media enterprises also by means of laws and regulations. As stipulated in the criminal law, in order to maintain the order of socialist market economy and social management, if one of the following acts constitutes a crime, he shall be investigated for criminal responsibility in accordance with the provisions: (1) using the Internet to sell fake and shoddy products or making false propaganda of goods and services; (2) using the Internet to damage the commercial reputation of other people or products; (3) Using the Internet to infringe upon the intellectual property rights of others; (4) fabricating and disseminating false information affecting securities and futures trading or disrupting financial order; (5) establishing obscene websites or web pages on the Internet, providing links to obscene websites, or disseminating obscene books and periodicals [19].

In terms of promoting industrial development, in the network environment of social media, the power of the government has been weakened. However, at this stage, the establishment of a good fair competition and service environment, the formulation of rules to reduce the risk of Internet users in e-commerce activities can give the market and society a necessary guarantee. There is no specific policy for social media, but most development of social media policies are integrated with network policies. In recent years, China has issued a number of policies to encourage the development of the industrial Internet industry. In September 2017, the Three-Year Action Plan for the Development of Industrial

E-commerce was released [20]. In October and November of the same year, China issued the “Guidance on Actively Promoting the Innovation and Application of Supply Chain” [21] and “Guiding Opinions on Deepening the Development of the ‘Internet + Advanced Manufacturing Industry’ in the Industrial Internet” [22]. In 2019, the Outline of Digital Rural Development Strategy was issued, [23] and in 2020, the Notice of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on Accelerating the Development of Industrial Internet was issued [24]. In April 2020, the CAC and National Development and Reform Commission issued the Implementation Plan for Promoting the Action of “Using Data to Enrich Wisdom” to Cultivate New Economic Development with an aim of building a multi-layer interactive industrial Internet platform to enable the digital transformation of small and medium-sized enterprises (Table 2) [25].

Enterprises are the direct operators and promoters of domestic and foreign market development. In China, with the in-depth development of the social media industry, for most people, social media meets personal shopping needs, expression needs, emotional maintenance, communication needs, knowledge needs and entertainment needs, therefore, the convenience of social interaction and personal expression is improved with the satisfaction of these needs. China’s social media is highly competitive internationally. To explore the spatial expansion of social media, WeChat, born in China, is a good case [26]. Since its launch in early 2011, WeChat has become the most popular mobile social media platform in China. At the WeChat partner communication meeting in November 2013, WeChat officially released some operation data: “WeChat has been online for three years, covering more than 200 countries around the world, releasing more than 20 language versions, and more than 2.7 billion monthly active users at home and abroad. Thanks to China’s large population base, which is a unique inborn advantage, WeChat successfully attracted 50 million users in Asia in less than a year. In order to achieve the same number of users, Line took 13 months and Kakao talk took 27 months [27]. Similarly, Tiktok, a short video sharing platform, has many loyal users abroad. One of the important reasons for the recent restrictions on Chinese social media applications by a few countries is that the successful marketing strategy of these applications is regarded as a threat.

On the one hand, market constraints are reflected in the game between market efficiency and national interests. For the government, the prohibition of foreign direct investment from providing domestic Internet content and the requirement for domestic companies to separate their domestic business activities from their foreign operations before going global is to protect China’s national interests. With the growth of Chinese companies at home and abroad, compliance with China’s domestic regulations and reputation sometimes comes at the cost of expanding overseas markets. WeChat is currently China’s most popular social media platform, but its global expansion plans have been hit several times because of international users’ concerns about censorship. Such situations continue to perplex users’ confidence

in WeChat and remind international users of the limitations of Chinese applications [10]. In the dilemma between attracting international users in an uncontrolled online environment and conforming to the domestic government regulations, Chinese Internet companies have adopted many creative ways in practice. On the other hand, there is asymmetry in data resources between sovereign states and enterprises. In practice, a large number of data are actually occupied and used by transnational Internet giants. Sovereign states lack practical control over some key and even strategic important data, which makes it impossible to directly apply enterprise data at the level of national governance. Moreover, in the real dilemma of not directly mastering some important data, sovereign states lack an effective data exchange mechanism with enterprises. This not only delays the realization of strategic objectives of sovereign countries to a certain extent, and also hinders the development of global digital economy [27].

### At the social level

At the social level, the government provides useful reference and guidance for social media operators to self-check and self-correct in specific content governance through means of laws and regulations. As can be seen from table 3, from communication tools, news media to online games and videos, China’s laws and policies have standardized the social media platform step by step, laying the foundation for the establishment of a long-term governance mechanism. In essence, personal online expression requires order and standardization, and calls for the timely emergence of ecological governance of network information content. From this point of view, there is a close relationship between the right of online expression and the ecological governance of online information content. Just as all freedom is not absolute, so is the right of online expression. People express their ideas through the Internet, not always in an orderly way. On the contrary, cyberspace is full of disordered, irrational, irresponsible and even illegal and criminal information. The disorder of online expression is actually due to the conflict between the online expression activities and the normative system, which makes the online order present an abnormal state [18]. Therefore, the government and enterprise norms are essential (Table 3).

Individual political participation has played a big role at the social level. The combination of government services at the government level and individual political participation makes the Chinese government use social media to significantly improve the level of social governance. In recent years, China’s national integrated government service platform has been put into trial operation, with more than 3.6 million service items of local departments and a large number of high-frequency hot public services. The national government affairs service platform has gathered more than 28 million pieces of data on government affairs matters in various regions, with 135 million registered users. The national data sharing and exchange platform has released more than 1300 data sharing service interfaces, and nearly 2000 categories of data commonly used by the masses and enterprises have been included in the list of departmental



data sharing responsibilities. The National People’s Congress has completed the construction of an online platform for filing and reviewing laws and regulations. The National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) has opened a mobile platform for members of the CPPCC National Committee to conduct online remote consultation on political affairs. Nearly 2000 CPPCC members have made more than 14000 comments and suggestions on the mobile platform. The construction of smart courts has been accelerated. China’s

judicial document database has published more than 96 million documents, and the cumulative number of visits has exceeded 45 billion. All these social applications are made easier with the help of social media applications. As advocated by China’s legal service network, it aims to realize the public legal service “visible by head up, accessible by raising hands, and available by scanning code”[28]. During the pandemic period, China’s health code and itinerary code offered through social media platforms provided useful experience for the control of the pandemic.

**Table 3:** List of some regulations on Internet(social media) content governance.

	Issuing Time	Issuing Agency	Name of Regulation	Function / Goal
1	Aug. 2014	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Interim Provisions on the Development and Management of Public Information Services through Instant Messaging Tools	Promote the healthy and orderly development of public information services through instant messaging tools, protect the legitimate rights and interests of citizens, legal persons and other organizations, and safeguard national security and public interests.
2	Jul. 2016	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Notice on Further Strengthening Management and Stopping False News	Crack down on and guard against false news on the Internet and standardize the order of network news information dissemination.
3	Jul. 2017	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Notice on Registration and Filing of National Internet Live Broadcasting Service Enterprises	Intensify efforts to rectify the chaos of online live broadcasting.
4	Sep. 2017	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Regulations on Management of Internet Users’ Public Account Information Service & Regulations on Management of Internet Group Information Service	Standardize the management of Internet users’ public accounts and the management of various online groups.
5	Dec. 2017	Eight ministries and commissions including the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee	Opinions on Strictly Regulating the Management of Online Game Market	Rectify illegal behaviors and bad contents of online games.
6	Feb. 2018	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Regulation of Microblog Information Service	Promote the healthy and orderly development of microblog information services, protect the legitimate rights and interests of citizens, legal persons and other organizations, and safeguard national security and public interest.
7	Jan. 2019	China Network Audition Program Service Association	Management Specification of Online Short Video Content Platform & Detailed Rules of Online Short Video Content Audit Standard	Standardize short video industry from platform management and content audit.
8	Sep. 2019	Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)	Regulations on Protection of Children’s Personal Information Online	Pay attention to the network protection of Children’s personal information and ensure the healthy growth of children.
9	Jan. 2022	Cyberspace Administration of China, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Public Security, State Administration of Market Administration	Internet Information Service Algorithm Recommendation Management Regulations	Regulate the algorithm recommendation activities of Internet information services, protect the rights and interests of users, and establish a security management system for the classification of algorithms.
10	Jan. 2022	Cyberspace Administration of China, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Industry, and Information Technology	Cybersecurity Review Measures	Internet platform operators carrying out data processing activities that affect or may affect national security will be included in the scope of the cybersecurity review; Platform operators holding more than 1 million users’ personal information must go through cybersecurity review before foreign listings.

However, in the mutual restriction between market efficiency and individual freedom, a very serious problem is that personal data rights are easily infringed by enterprises. The boundary between individual and enterprise data rights is not clear, which leads to the behavior of enterprise infringing personal data rights. Although some individual users are aware that enterprises are collecting their own information, they do not know whether their information will be further processed, how the information will be processed and where it will eventually flow. The processing of personal data may cause frequent flow of personal data information and even the risk of leakage. Moreover, the process of obtaining personal data is likely to be secret and asymmetric [29]. Another problem is that private social media are likely to abuse their freedom, as they might exclude dissent, distort information, avoid public problems that may entail risks. These problems worsen when ownership of social media platforms is concentrated in the hands of a few people. The motivation of pursuing profit, the demand of advertisers and the weak position of consumers are the key factors that distort the function of private social media platforms [27]. When netizens are disgusted with the platform's participation in the dissemination of "fake news" and the alleged manipulation of election politics, and are aware of the invasion of privacy, data abuse and market dominance by social media enterprises, the platform will be severely criticized for failing to reduce online hate speech, maltreat, harass or stop the propaganda of terrorism. Governments are then promoted to challenge the power and influence of these global digital media companies, and to seek strategies to regulate their content and operations [30]. Given the growing number of complaints from citizens, radical groups, NGOs, and politicians, these companies might defend themselves by saying that they are just content intermediaries or service providers and therefore not responsible for managing the content they host. But such excuses will become increasingly ineffective.

### Discussion

Is social media governance effective in China? On the national security level, fortunately, China has so far not experienced a national security threat like the Arab Spring triggered by social media, and thanks to the macro stability, China's social and economic development has been steadily moving forward. On the level of the development of digital economy, great achievements have been made. With the continuous efforts of the Chinese government, China has released huge productivity due to its large market scale and active Internet users. Statistics from the Global Digital Economy White Paper released by the Academy of Information and Communication Technology of China show that in 2020, the size of the digital economy in 47 countries reached \$32.6 trillion in value added, of which China ranks second in the world with a digital economy of nearly \$5.4 trillion [28]. The new momentum for digital economy development has been continuously enhanced. Even in the international arena, Chinese

social media has done well. In the 2021 Web Data Report, six social media platforms in China: WhatsApp, WeChat, TikTok, QQ, Douyin, and Sina Weibo made it into the top 10 most used social media apps in the world. As the most downloaded app in 2021, TikTok has over 1 billion users worldwide. According to the report, TikTok earned nearly \$4 billion in revenue in 2021, most of which came from advertising. But this year, TikTok's revenue is expected to triple to \$12 billion, more than Twitter and Snap combined [31]. Social media has become an important part of the public's daily life. From the perspective of the traffic scale of mainstream social media platforms, WeChat, Douyin and Weibo are the top 3 traffic platforms, while Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, Zhihu and Douyin are growing faster [32]. Among them, Wechat, which has always insisted on providing free services, has the highest satisfaction score, and gets high scores in all segments of the population.

Although China has made a lot of efforts in social media governance, due to its own strength and national conditions, its shortcomings are still obvious. First of all, in terms of access restrictions on social media, it is still difficult to completely lift up restrictions for national security reasons, and this has affected the directness and timeliness of people's foreign exchange and interaction to a certain extent. This has also resulted in China's weakness in the international reputation and image which further affect China's interests abroad. This makes even the legitimate security issues in China, such as Tibet issue and reasonable news regulation, be criticized by Western media unilaterally [33-36].

Secondly, China's social media products are facing challenges on the road of overseas development, and the internationalization process of WeChat and Tiktok will be very difficult. It is a undeniable fact that almost no country will contract the core services of the communication market to overseas companies. But people's rejection and resistance to WeChat and Tiktok are also linked to privacy and security. The overseas development strategy of social media products is not as simple as launching several overseas language versions. It often needs to deal with a series of problems such as cultural differences, user communication habits differences, data security and so on.

Thirdly, although a lot of Internet related laws and regulations have been formulated, the overall effect of social media governance is not fully satisfactory. For example, there is a tendency that the scope of application of laws is too wide in practice. This tendency is mostly related to some vague prohibitions, such as "threatening national security, divulging state secrets, overthrowing the government or destroying national unity" or "harming national dignity and interests", which are really difficult to define in the specific implementation process. Sometime, these prohibitions have overlapping. Even if the same cases are involved, the practice of confusing administrative and criminal measures with violations of private rights is likely to occur. In privacy protection, despite China's creative development of health codes to regulate population movement amid the pandemic of COVID-19, it

triggered a debate on personal data protection and privacy issues.

In a word, China's social media governance system will encounter many problems in the process of exploration. However, from the present point of view, the art of walking the high wire with the help of the government, enterprises and individuals as the main agents of the country, the market and the society and the multi-agent collaborative system is the most suitable way for China, although it needs to carefully weigh the interests of the three parties before it can reach the three level governance goals.

### Conclusion

China's social media governance is just like high wire walking. Because of the balanced beam of multi-agent collaborative system, the government, enterprises and individuals, as the main agents of the state, market and society, have formed a delicate relationship structure with social media as the platform, and have been moving forward steadily towards the goal of balancing national security, market efficiency and social interactions.

Although China's multi-agent collaborative system has basically achieved the expected triple goals in social media governance, the regulatory social media governance measures with the government at the core have been criticized by the West. However, in the post epidemic period, judging from the concerted action of European and American countries, the governance of social media may also change in the direction of strengthening regulations. The global spread of Covid-19 poses a major threat to human life safety and health. The world economy is facing the most serious recession and contraction since the great depression. At the same time, social media governance also faces many new challenges, such as individual cyber security threats, the balance between development and security, the dissemination of false information, and so on.

In terms of governance model of social media, the national active intervention policy which gives priority to national security is more in line with China's reality, which has a good matching degree with China's social customs, statute law tradition, national security concept and people's behavior habits. To some degree, the EU also adopts the policy of active intervention by public institutions. In terms of data protection, the EU has issued the "General Data Protection Regulations", which aims to prevent the risks of new technologies to the EU society and establish a unified data protection and regulatory standard applicable to the EU. Britain and the United States and other countries adopt self-regulation policies for the governance of online information contents. However, for the Chinese society in the transition period, it is more meaningful to have a clear rule when dealing with the boundary of different agent's right.

In terms of governance means, the model based on balancing multiple objectives of national security, market development and social interaction is the future trend. A large part of the criticism on China is due to the different sense of implementation between

Chinese and Western policies. For example, Internet restrictions and regulation in the United States are directly implemented by enterprises, but they are also agent to the government regulation in essence, as shown by the Snowden event. The governance of social media in China is led by the government regulations, followed by specific institutions and implemented by enterprises. Of course, these two approaches both have advantages and disadvantages. Obviously, all China's behavior is an attempt based on its own national conditions, and its merits and demerits should be judged by its people and history.

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