

retired Party leaders, are either algorithmically demoted or filtered out entirely before reaching users' feeds (Yan & Li, 2024).

Second, Tencent operates multiple content review centers staffed by trained content moderators and its internal Party committee members, who are responsible for manually reviewing flagged content and issuing takedown orders. These teams work in tandem with local propaganda departments, responding quickly to shifting censorship priorities, especially during sensitive periods, such as National People's Congress meetings, anniversary times of major protests, or the death of dissidents (Chen & Qiang, 2022; Liu, 2023). In addition, during such sensitive periods, Tencent's news and information platforms often engage in widespread keyword purges, removing search results or entire topics to contain discourse.

Third, Tencent employs real-time keyword suppression systems within its news portals and in-app search engines. For instance, during the COVID-19 breakout, users searching for terms like "Wuhan lab" or "Zero-COVID protests" on Tencent's news and information platforms may encounter either no results or be redirected to sanitized official narratives (Xie, Foxman, & Xu, 2021). Research has shown that these keyword blacklists are updated frequently and dynamically, often in reaction to breaking news events, reflecting close coordination between Tencent's operation teams and government censors (Liu, 2023). Moreover, Tencent actively engages in content recycling and agenda setting on its platforms, prominently featuring stories that emphasize China's technological triumphs, economic achievements, and international diplomacy framed from a pro-CCP perspective. By doing this, Tencent ensures that not only is dissent suppressed, but that users are repeatedly exposed to ideologically uplifting and loyalty-inducing narratives, a strategy referred to as "thinking guidance" (思想引导) in the CCP doctrine (Brady, 2015).

To sum up, Tencent's news and information platforms do not merely reflect the CCP narratives; they serve as integral instruments in the CCP's information control apparatus. This corporate implementation exemplifies a tightly controlled digital ecosystem in which censorship is not just defensive, but proactive and institutionalized, designed to shape public perception, suppress dissent, and reinforce ideological orthodoxy.

Gaming and Entertainment Control

As discussed in Tencent's core product expansion chapter, after years of strategic expansion and investment, Tencent has become the operator of the world's largest gaming empire, dominating both domestic and global gaming markets. Beyond gaming, Tencent's digital entertainment landscape encompasses its streaming and media services, particularly Tencent Video, one of China's top online video platforms with nearly 435 million monthly active users reported in March 2025 (Statista, 2025). No surprises here, Tencent's gaming and entertainment operations exist under the heavy scrutiny of Chinese regulations, where digital platforms are treated not only as commercial enterprises but as vehicles for ideological dissemination and youth conditioning.

Since 2021, under directives from the CPD, the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) has intensified efforts to "cleanse" China's gaming environment. These efforts target content with "historical nihilism,"²⁶ "excessive entertainment and idol worship culture," and "vulgar, violent, or effeminate imagery" (State Council, 2021; Liu & Zhao, 2022). In response, Tencent has adopted a proactive approach that closely mirrors the government's requirements by embedding the CCP values in gaming content and developing systems to restrict minors'²⁷ playtime.

²⁶ "Historical nihilism" refers to interpretations of history that challenge official CCP narratives.

²⁷ In China, a minor is defined as anyone under the age of 18, according to the PRC Law of Protection of Minors.

For instance, Tencent’s operating games, such as King of Glory²⁸, now feature in-game patriotic storylines, historical figures drawn from the CCP-sanctioned mythology, and periodic announcements promoting the CCP ideology narratives. This marks a shift toward “gamified propaganda,” where state values are embedded in entertainment to normalize loyalty and nationalism (Sun, 2022). In addition, Tencent’s enforcer role in the censorship system has been shown in its regulation of minors’ behavior. According to the NPPA 2021 rules, minors in China are only allowed to play online games for one hour per day on Fridays, weekends, and public holidays (State Council, 2021). To enforce this, Tencent developed and deployed a facial recognition system called “Midnight Patrol” that identifies underage users attempting to play during restricted hours. This system cross-references real-name registration data with facial imagery, locking accounts that attempt to evade regulatory limits (Reuters, 2021).

Tencent’s technological enforcement marks an unprecedented fusion of biometric surveillance and behavioral regulation, where a private company actively implements government mandates on minors’ screen time, daily habits, and digital consumption patterns. Although framed as protecting minors from addiction to online games, critics argue that it reflects a broader ambition to engineer moral discipline through AI-driven systems (Xu & Qiang, 2023).

Furthermore, to tightly align with the government’s vision of “healthy entertainment and correct values” (State Council, 2021), Tencent also engages in self-censorship by auditing game and online streaming content before release or even suspending services that might violate the CCP’s standards. These potentially offensive materials in games could be:

²⁸ Also known as Honor of Kings, originally launched in China in 2015 by Tencent and has been the consistently ranked as one of the most popular and highest-grossing mobile games in China with about 128 million daily active users in China in the fourth quarter of 2024 (Tencent, 2024).

- Characters dressed in non-traditional attire;
- Narratives involving rebellion, religious symbolism, or sensitive historical analogies;
- Dialogue that could be interpreted as suggestive or politically ambiguous.

The similar ideological enforcement employed in dramas and films hosted on Tencent Video includes:

- Blur or remove tattoos, cleavage, and foreign flags;
- Cut the storyline that contains LGBTQ+ subplots or controversial historical themes;
- Mute the in-show dialogue that might have politically sensitive discourse (Zhang, 2022).

Tencent's self-censorship and other alignment with the CCP standards extend well beyond just compliance. It once again shows the relationship between tech companies and authoritarian governance. In the realm of gaming and entertainment, Tencent operates as the enforcer, embedding surveillance, ideological education, and moral messaging into everyday digital experiences. As the CCP promotes "cultural security" alongside national security (State Council, 2021), Tencent's role in enforcement illustrates how private corporations are being marshaled to implement social engineering at scale.

Surveillance on FinTech Services

Tencent's FinTech infrastructure, integrated in WeChat/Weixin as WeChat Pay, plays a dual role in China's digital communication and media censorship system. On one hand, it provides seamless digital payment methods to make Chinese people's daily lives convenient. On the other hand, it operates as a technological node for government surveillance and behavioral monitoring. Blended into the broader WeChat ecosystem, WeChat Pay is used by over 900 million users and is deeply embedded in both urban and rural economic life in China (Tencent,

2024). It supports everything from one-to-one transfers and public transportation fares to health care, education, and government services.

A defining feature of WeChat Pay, which facilitates Tencent's role as a censorship enforcer, is its mandatory real-name registration that links every financial transaction to the user's government-issued ID number and mobile phone number. This feature, purportedly implemented for security and fraud prevention purposes, creates a highly centralized, traceable database of financial behavior, allowing Tencent and the government to track user patterns, geographic movements, and lifestyle choices in real-time (Kostka & Antoine, 2023). Under the *Cybersecurity Law (2017)* and the *Data Security Law (2021)*, Chinese tech companies are legally obligated to cooperate with public security organs by providing user data for investigations, public safety, and national security purposes when needed. Therefore, although framed as a tool for convenience and innovation, WeChat Pay actually functions as an infrastructure for government surveillance in the digital age.

The most prominent example of Tencent's surveillance capacity emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the company partnered with the government to integrate "health code" systems into WeChat/Weixin. These digital QR codes assigned color-coded risk statuses to individuals based on their travel history, contact with Covid-positive persons, or even proximity to protest zones (Mozur et al., 2020). Enforced through WeChat Pay check-ins at grocery stores, train stations, and public buildings, these codes served as real-time mobility controls, effectively turning Tencent into an enforcement arm of public health governance. While traditionally and typically reserved for government authorities, Tencent's infrastructure for mass population tracking and dynamic risk classification during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that the

company and its developing technologies are economically useful, politically reliable, and ideologically safe.

Moreover, Tencent's FinTech services have been used to support social credit infrastructure, both in its official and unofficial forms. Reports indicate that some local governments and private-sector actors have utilized transactional and social media data from platforms such as WeChat/Weixin and WeChat Pay to generate individual reputation scores, which can impact access to financial loans, public services²⁹, or even digital freedom and online privileges (Kostka, 2019). These digital freedoms and online privileges may include accessing certain online services, registering for social media accounts, digital purchasing power, posting content or comments online, live streaming, and algorithmic visibility, among others. (Kostka & Antoine, 2023; Zhang & Luo, 2022). These enforcements illustrate the co-evolution of private FinTech ecosystems and government surveillance ambitions, whereby Tencent's commercial dominance is increasingly leveraged to fulfill the CCP governance and control functions.

In addition to the surveillance per government request, Tencent also engages in its internal data profiling, generating users' behavioral models that may feed into credit assessments and targeted advertising. These data sets, although intended for commercial use, are interoperable with government databases, particularly when Tencent collaborates with state-owned banks and local authorities on financial inclusion projects. Ultimately, Tencent's FinTech services exemplify how platform capitalism in China converges with authoritarian governance. WeChat Pay is not simply a digital payment tool; rather, it is a critical infrastructure for digital governance that enables the CCP to extend its behavioral surveillance, ideological influence, and social control far beyond traditional boundaries.

²⁹ Public services, such as public transportation or national parks, etc.

Why Not Make Tencent State-owned

From the analysis above, we see that Tencent's institutional role goes far beyond its corporate charter. It operates at the intersection of digital capitalism and authoritarian governance, functioning as an enforcer of political discipline across all communication and media services. Through its advanced AI and cloud computing algorithmic infrastructure, in social media, WeChat/Weixin and QQ serve as infrastructure for government surveillance and censorship; in financial technology, WeChat Pay integrates into national digital currency trials and real-name authentication systems; in gaming and entertainment, Tencent Video and Tencent running games implement content and behavioral restrictions aligned with the CCP ideologies. In essence, Tencent has become a state-firm hybrid—a publicly listed company with global investors, but functionally a subordinate actor within the CCP's centralized governance architecture. This evolution highlights a deeper pattern in China's model of digital authoritarianism, where private companies are permitted to grow and innovate, but only under the government's shadow and within the parameters of ideological conformity (Qin, Stromberg, & Wu, 2022). Here, my question arises: why has the CCP not made Tencent a state-owned enterprise³⁰?

Legitimacy and Market Competence

One key reason Tencent maintains its private status is global legitimacy. Being perceived as a private corporation allows Tencent to access international capital markets, acquire stakes on a global scale, and expand its business into foreign markets. In exchange for market access, subsidies, and regulatory protection, Tencent must align its priorities with those of the CCP. In addition, this state-firm hybrid model enables the CCP to showcase a modern, innovative

³⁰ In the 1950s, the CCP nationalized 90% of private enterprises during a process of “socialist transformation of capitalist industry and commerce” (对资本主义工商业的社会主义改造) (Riskin, 1987).

economy driven by “Chinese champions,” which supports narratives of techno-nationalism and rejuvenation (Zhao, 2021). Tencent’s private identity thus enables it to serve as a soft-power asset for the regime’s positive image.

Outsourcing of Repression and Decentralized Authoritarianism

The phrase “outsourcing of repression” in the context of Chinese digital governance refers to the delegation of censorship, surveillance, and ideological enforcement responsibilities from the government to private tech companies. Rather than relying solely on state departments to manage the internet and control media, the CCP compels or incentivizes companies like Tencent to perform those functions on its behalf. This approach is central to what scholars call “decentralized authoritarianism,” referring to a governance model where authoritarian control is distributed across a network of bureaucratic, corporate, and technological nodes (Qin, Stromberg, & Wu, 2022; Greitens, 2022). In this system, operating as a private company, Tencent is expected to:

- Monitor and remove “harmful content” under legal mandates.
- Deploy AI and algorithmic filtering to preemptively identify politically sensitive materials.
- Implement CCP-led campaigns and censorship mechanisms.
- Operate under legal obligations and with guidance from the CAC and other governmental entities.

This system offers flexibility and plausible deniability—the government avoids the costs of maintaining a massive censorship apparatus while holding private companies responsible for enforcement failures. This networked authoritarianism model ensures that the CCP maintains

tight political control while allowing market forces to manage the day-to-day operations of its surveillance infrastructure.

Tencent's Censorship Beyond China and Its Global Impact

As one of China's most globally invested and influential tech companies, Tencent's role as a corporate enforcer of Chinese digital governance extends beyond China's borders. In fact, Tencent has exported the model of content control, behavioral regulation, and political compliance through its international platforms, gaming studios, and investments. The global impact of this includes the suppression of speech among overseas Chinese communities, self-censorship in international gaming and entertainment industries, and growing scrutiny from Western regulatory bodies concerned about their national security and digital sovereignty.

Censoring Overseas WeChat Users

Although WeChat is divided into Weixin 微信 for mainland China users and WeChat for international users, research has shown that the censorship infrastructure also applies to overseas communities, particularly to those communicating in the Chinese language with mainland China Weixin users. Furthermore, the messages sent between foreign users are also subject to content surveillance, and those containing politically sensitive content, such as "Tiananmen," "Uyghur," or "Taiwan independence," can be blocked or used to train domestic censorship algorithms (Knockel, Ruan, & Deibert, 2020). There are documented cases of shadow banning, chat disruptions, and account suspensions among members of the Chinese diaspora in countries like Australia, the U.S., and Canada, especially when participating in online discussions about democracy, Taiwan, or Xinjiang. This transnational repression, where a foreign government's censorship rules are applied to non-citizens beyond its jurisdiction, facilitated by a private corporation, shows that Tencent's enforcer power exceeds the national borders (Greitens, 2022).

Self-Censorship in Global Gaming and Entertainment

Tencent's diverse investments in global entertainment have reshaped how Western media companies produce and distribute content, particularly regarding politically sensitive topics involving China and the CCP.

In the gaming industry, developers and executives have admitted to self-censoring their game narratives, character design, and map labeling—marking Taiwan as part of China—to avoid triggering a Chinese regulatory backlash. They usually remove or avoid content referring to Taiwan, Tibet, or Hong Kong, or ban players whose voices support anti-China protests (Zhu, 2021).

In the film industry, particularly in Hollywood, Tencent Pictures serves as a co-producer or sponsor of several major blockbusters, including *Top Gun: Maverick*, *Warcraft*, and *King Kong: Skull Island*, among others. These collaborations often involve script adjustments or scene deletions to align with Chinese censorship requirements. For example, film studios have been known to remove flags, change villains, or downplay democratic themes in order to obtain approval from the Chinese administration and avoid jeopardizing access to the Chinese box office (Riley, 2022).

These dynamics create a global environment where Western professionals preemptively censor themselves not because of the Chinese law, but to preserve financial relationships with Tencent and further get access to China's lucrative market.

Western Regulatory Scrutiny

Tencent's success and global expansion have attracted more and more regulatory concern in the West, where officials are increasingly wary of foreign tech influence over user data, content control, and democratic discourse. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United

States (CFIUS) has investigated Tencent's investment in companies like Riot Games and Epic Games, demanding detailed data security audits and assurances that their U.S. user data is not accessible from China or by the CCP (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2021). The Trump Administration also attempted to ban WeChat in the U.S. in 2021 under national security grounds, but the federal court in the *U.S. WeChat Users Alliance v. Trump* (2020) case issued an injunction preventing the ban from taking effect. In 2020, some Australian senators publicly questioned whether or not WeChat's censorship mechanisms were interfering with Chinese-Australian political engagement. Similarly, U.S. lawmakers and advocacy groups have warned that WeChat's influence in Chinese immigrant communities could be used to amplify disinformation or silence dissent, particularly during elections or protests (Freedom House, 2022). In Europe, officials have highlighted Tencent's opaque data practices and its ties to the CCP, raising concerns about the CCP's indirect ideological influence over European digital platforms (Freedom House, 2022).

Above, these regulatory trends reflect a growing awareness of whether foreign influence over digital platforms is political or commercial. In fact, Tencent's expansion and investment abroad are viewed not only as business practices but also as extensions of China's digital governance regime, which raises concerns about information sovereignty and democratic resilience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tencent is not just a technology company; it is a key enforcer of China's digital authoritarianism. Through its control over social media, news, entertainment, and gaming, Tencent enforces the CCP's communication and media censorship laws and policies not only in China but globally. As the CCP strengthens its cyber sovereignty laws, Tencent's role in digital

surveillance and information control continues to expand, posing long-term challenges for global digital freedom, media integrity, and cybersecurity governance.

The next chapter provides a summary of key findings and concludes the dissertation.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined the evolving relationship between the Chinese government and Tencent through the dual lenses of the political economy of communication and propaganda theory. The study examined the historical trajectory of Tencent's emergence, the mechanisms and motivations behind contemporary Chinese communication and media censorship, and Tencent's role within this censorship system. Using a case study approach enriched by document analysis and discourse analysis, this research reveals how Tencent functions not only as a commercially successful business but also as a pivotal actor in the Chinese government's strategy to manage information, control narratives, and shape public discourse in the digital age.

Summary of Major Findings

RQ1: Historical and Operational Contexts of Tencent's Emergence

Tencent emerged at a critical juncture in China's reform era, when economic liberalization intersected with the state's ambition to modernize through new technologies. The study finds that Tencent's growth was not merely a result of business success, but also a consequence of its alignment with the CCP's policies and goals. From the launch of QQ in 1999 to the ubiquity of WeChat/Weixin and the domination in gaming today, Tencent's operational strategies, such as embracing datafication, platform integration, and user stickiness, reflect both market logic and political expediency. The company has flourished in an environment where the government encourages innovation but demands political loyalty and content compliance.

RQ2: The "How" and "Why" of Chinese Communication and Media Censorship in the Digital Age

The findings show that Chinese communication and media censorship today is multi-dimensional. The “Why” centers on the government’s need to maintain regime legitimacy, control social unrest, and guide ideological orientation. The “How” involves increasingly sophisticated techniques, including algorithmic filtering, backend surveillance, comment guiding, and laws that hold companies accountable for user-generated content. Rather than blunt suppression, censorship is often pre-emptive, collaborative—between the government and corporations, and embedded into the digital infrastructure. This strategy creates an appearance of openness while ensuring the maintenance of discursive power.

RQ3: Tencent’s Role in the Censorship System

Tencent acts as both a corporate actor and a proxy censor. As a commercial enterprise, Tencent depends on user engagement and data monetization to make profits. As a quasi-government agent, it implements censorship directives through a self-monitoring system, keyword blocking, an AI moderation tool, and other platform-specific mechanisms. Tencent’s compliance with the government policies is not simply about survival; it has become a mode of participation in the ideological and infrastructural governance of Chinese cyberspace. This blurs the lines between private innovation and government propaganda, illustrating one of the core theses of the political economy of communication.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged, as they may affect the scope and generalizability of the findings.

First, the inherent opacity of both Chinese corporate structures and government institutions restricts my access to internal documentation and primary data. This lack of transparency constrains the research to publicly available materials, policy documents, official

press releases, and secondary literature, which may present a sanitized or curated view of the underlying realities. Furthermore, the centralized and non-democratic nature of Chinese governance renders it particularly challenging to empirically trace the inner workings of the decision-making process related to communication and media regulation, censorship enforcement, and state-corporate negotiations. Second, while Tencent serves as a representative and influential case study of a Chinese-born tech conglomerate, it is not wholly representative of all Chinese multinational technology companies. Other major players in the digital ecosystem, such as ByteDance, Alibaba, and Baidu, may operate under different business models, regulatory relationships, or censorship strategies. These differences were outside the scope of this study but are essential for a more nuanced understanding of China's even broader platform governance landscape. Third, this research would have greatly benefited from incorporating empirical data that captures the lived experiences of Chinese internet users. Surveys, interviews, or focus group discussions with Chinese citizens across different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds could offer valuable insights into how censorship is perceived, internalized, navigated, or resisted on the ground. Such perspectives would enrich the study by revealing the power dynamics of censorship as encountered in daily life, the strategies of compliance or subversion that users develop, and the generational or regional variations in attitudes toward censored media control. However, due to practical, ethical, and political constraints, including risks to participants' digital safety and the researcher's limited access, such fieldwork was not possible.

Future Research Directions

Building on the findings of this study, several promising avenues for future research can be pursued to further explore the evolving relationship between Chinese tech companies and government communication and media censorship.

First, a user-centric approach could shed light on how Chinese citizens engage with censorship on a daily basis. By employing ethnographic methods or conducting user survey across various demographic groups, researchers can gain insights into how individuals navigate, resist, or comply with government-mandated content restrictions. Such work would reveal important dynamics related to digital literacy, the internalization of censorship norms, and generational differences in understanding the relationship between the platform and government.

Second, comparative studies on platform governance are essential. Investigating how other major Chinese tech corporations, such as ByteDance or Alibaba, negotiate their relationships with the government would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity and convergence in platform-government dynamics. This can help scholars identify structural patterns or divergent strategies among Chinese tech giants operating under similar regulatory constraints.

Third, future research should explore the transnational implications of China's digital governance model. Since this study primarily focuses on Chinese communication and media censorship and its relationship with tech companies within China, future research should investigate how platform governance norms and censorship logics are exported, adapted, or contested in different regulatory environments. This would provide a comprehensive critical perspective on the global influence of Chinese tech companies.

Finally, the growing role of artificial intelligence and algorithmic moderation in censorship systems deserves a closer examination. As discussed in this study, digital platforms such as WeChat and Tencent Video are increasingly relying on machine learning tools and predictive analytics to automate content filtering. Analyzing how these technologies are

implemented, refined, and supervised can contribute to broader discussions on AI ethics, algorithmic bias, and the political implications of automated content regulation.

Author's Reflection

This dissertation has shown that Tencent is not merely a tech company; rather, it is a central node in China's authoritarian information system. Its ability to thrive hinges not just on innovation, but on its deep entanglement with state ideology and censorship infrastructure. As China's digital governance model increasingly draws global attention, whether as a threat or a blueprint, it becomes imperative to study its inner workings, contradictions, and evolutions. By tracing the historical roots, operational mechanisms, and theoretical underpinnings of Tencent's role in China's digital censorship, this study aims to provide a critical foundation for scholars, policymakers, and other tech and media companies seeking to understand how power operates in China's digital world.

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